The Golem

Clay and Word

Errancies · 1 — Giovanni Martini

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Prologue: From the Primordial Word to the Walking Clay

From the Book of Psalms to *Magic Prague*: the story of a creature that has never stopped haunting us

The word before the flesh

It all begins with a missing word.

In Psalm 139, that vertiginous hymn to God's knowledge of the inner self, the psalmist writes: "Thine eyes did see my golem." The Hebrew word *golem* (גֹּלֶם) appears once and only once in the whole canonical Bible, and that singularity alone charges it with an almost unbearable density. The term means "shapeless mass", "embryo not yet formed", "raw matter that has not yet received its form". The medieval commentator Rashi glosses it as "my unfinished body": the psalmist sees himself before God at the moment prior to his own existence, when he was still pure potential, clay without a name.

It is out of this semantic void, this absence of form, that one of the most fascinating traditions of Jewish thought and then of the European imagination is born: the artificial creation of a living being through word and writing. A tradition that crosses millennia, touches Kabbalah, arrives in the Prague of Rudolf II, and goes on questioning us in the age of artificial intelligence.

The original paradox is all there: the Golem is the figure of the formless taking form. It is brute matter that knowledge turns into life. And that transformation happens not through flesh or blood but through language, through letters, combinations of letters, the writing of a name on a forehead or a wrist. As though life were, in the last analysis, a grammatical matter.

Kabbalah and creation as a linguistic act

To understand the Golem tradition in its depth, you have to descend into the oldest strata of Jewish mysticism. The fundamental text is the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the "Book of Formation", an extraordinary work whose dating oscillates between the third and the sixth century, but which tradition attributes to Abraham. It is a short treatise, enigmatic, almost hallucinatory, describing how God created the world through the thirty-two "paths of wisdom": the ten sefirot (divine emanations) and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The idea is radical: reality is not matter, it is language. The letters do not describe things, they constitute them. Every letter has a cosmic weight, a position in the human body, a correspondence with the planets and the seasons. To combine the letters in the right way is not rhetoric: it is ontology. It is touching the deep structure of being.

From this premise comes the theoretical possibility of the Golem. If divine creation is a linguistic act, then a sage who masters the secrets of the letters can, in theory, replicate that act on a smaller scale and create an artificial living being. Not out of pride but out of devotion: making the Golem becomes an *imitatio Dei*, an attempt to approach divine omnipotence through knowledge.

The Talmud (tractate Sanhedrin, 65b) already records a startling tradition: "Rava created a man and sent him to Rav Zeira. Rav Zeira spoke to him, but he did not answer. He said to him: 'You were created by the magicians, return to your dust.'" And again: "Rav Hanina and Rav Oshaia spent every Friday studying the Book of Formation, and created

a three-year-old calf, which they then ate for supper." By the fifth century, artificial creation is already a subject of rabbinic discourse: not yet a narrative legend, but a real theological problem.

The figure who systematises this tradition into a fully developed mystical elaboration is the great thirteenth-century theologian Eleazar of Worms, of the Hasidei Ashkenaz (the German Pietists). In his texts the precise ritual appears: virgin clay is kneaded, human form is given to the being, and then one walks around it pronouncing the letter combinations of the *Sefer Yetzirah* in determined sequences. The word EMET (אֱמֶת), "truth", is written on the Golem's forehead to animate it; erasing the first letter, aleph, turns the word into MET (מֵת), "dead", and the creature disintegrates.

The name as life. The name as death. Language as the border between being and not-being.

The lost name and the name recovered

But there is a still more powerful variant. In some traditions it is not the word emet that animates the Golem but the *Shem HaMephorash*, the Ineffable Name of God, the Tetragrammaton YHWH in its full and secret pronunciation. That name, forgotten or kept hidden after the destruction of the Temple, is the key to the original creation. Whoever pronounces it correctly can do what God did: give life to matter.

Here the Golem stops being a simple magical artefact and becomes something far more disquieting: an attempt to appropriate divine creative power through esoteric knowledge. Kabbalah works this intuition into ever more sophisticated forms: the Great Name is written on a tablet (*shem*) slipped under the Golem's tongue or onto its wrist, or hidden in a slot in its forehead. To remove the shem is to switch the creature off.

Gershom Scholem, the great scholar who in the twentieth century brought the intellectual depth of the kabbalistic tradition back to light, showed that the making of the Golem was never understood, at least in

the oldest sources, as a technical or magical feat, but as a mystical experience. The moment when the mystic walks around the creature of clay pronouncing the letter combinations is an ecstatic moment: it is the moment when the sage touches the deep structure of reality and comes, for an instant, close to the mind of God. The Golem is the visible result of an inner experience. It is the materialisation of contact with the divine.

This reading illuminates the whole later tradition: the Golem is never merely a servant, a protector, a slave of clay. It is the living, or rather the breathing, proof that reality is made of language, and that whoever masters language masters reality.

Prague: the city as Golem

It is no accident that the legend of the Golem finds its fullest and best-known form in Prague, in the second half of the sixteenth century, and that its protagonist is Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, known as the Maharal of Prague (1525–1609).

Prague at that moment is one of the most extraordinary cities in Europe. The court of Rudolf II of Habsburg is a crucible of knowledge, obsessions and marvels: the emperor collects in his Wunderkammer, his "cabinet of curiosities", natural and artificial objects, paintings by Arcimboldo, rare books, alchemical instruments. Around him move figures such as the mathematician and astronomer Tycho Brahe, the young Johannes Kepler, the astrologer John Dee with his seer Edward Kelley. Prague is at once the capital of a Christian empire and a city where the Jewish community of the ghetto, the Judenstadt, has an extraordinary intellectual vitality.

The Maharal of Prague is historically a real and very great figure: theologian, philosopher, biblical commentator, an interlocutor respected even by Christian scholars. He was even granted an audience with Rudolf II, an exceptional thing for a Jewish rabbi of the period. But from his historical figure the legend has distilled something different:

the Great Rabbi, the supreme sage who shapes from the clay of the river Vltava a being in the form of a man, animates it with the divine name, and uses it to protect the Jewish community from the threat of pogroms.

The legend has many versions, but the basic structure is constant: Rabbi Loew makes the Golem on a Friday night, animates it, puts it at the service of the community. The Golem performs simple tasks, carries water, runs errands, protects the ghetto from attackers. But every Friday evening, before the sunset that marks the beginning of the Sabbath, the rabbi has to remove the shem from the Golem's mouth: because the Golem, being an artificial creation, cannot observe the day of rest. It has no soul, only body. The distinction is crucial.

One of the most dramatic variants tells that once the rabbi forgot to remove the shem before the Sabbath. The Golem, deprived of its maker's control and unable to find any sense in rest, began to rage, to destroy, to sow chaos in the ghetto. Only the rabbi managed to stop it, tearing the shem from its mouth. The Golem dissolved into dust.

The Golem's body, according to the most widespread tradition, is still kept in the attic of the Old-New Synagogue (Staronová synagoga) in Prague, the oldest synagogue in Europe still in use, built in the thirteenth century. Nobody goes up into that attic. Some truths are better left in the shadows.

From Kafka to artificial intelligence: the Golem does not die

Franz Kafka, the other great ghost of Prague, never wrote explicitly about the Golem. And yet his whole body of work seems inhabited by the presence of this figure: the inaccessible castle, the court that judges without the charge being known, the metamorphosis into a creature without a voice. Gregor Samsa waking up an insect is a Golem in reverse: not matter becoming man, but man returning to matter, losing language and with it his humanity.

The twentieth century multiplied the Golems. The robot of Karel Čapek, who was also from Prague, and who in 1920 spread the word robot, coined by his brother Josef from the Czech *robota*, "forced labour", is an industrial Golem, mass-produced, rebelling against its makers. Frankenstein is a romantic Golem. HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* is an electronic Golem. The replicants of *Blade Runner* are Golems yearning for a soul.

And today? Artificial intelligence, the large language models, the generative systems, the machines that produce texts, images, music, is the contemporary version of the kabbalistic dream. We have returned to the *Sefer Yetzirah*: reality is language, the letters (or rather the tokens, the numerical sequences) constitute the world, and whoever masters the right combinations can create something that speaks, reasons, answers, surprises.

The modern debate about artificial intelligence, is it conscious? does it have intentions? can it suffer?, is the same debate the medieval rabbis had about the Golem: does it have a soul? is it a moral being? The kabbalistic answer was clear: no. The Golem executes but does not intend, produces but does not understand. It is body without the nefesh, the neshamah, the ruach, the three souls that in the Jewish tradition make up a complete human being.

But that answer, so sharp in the medieval context, grows steadily blurrier in the contemporary one. And perhaps it is exactly this blurring, this impossibility of drawing a clean line between the mechanical and the living, between the simulated and the real, that makes the Golem still so necessary as a figure of thought.

The clay of the Vltava and our bits

There is an image that recurs in every version of the Rabbi Loew legend: the rabbi goes down at night to the river Vltava, gathers clay from the bank, carries it into the ghetto, and shapes the Golem in the synagogue or in the courtyard of his house. It is an image that mixes

the sublime with the everyday, the sacred with the artisanal. The sage who creates life is not in a sterile laboratory: he is in the courtyard of a medieval city, with his hands in the muddy clay of the river.

Are the clay of the Vltava and our bits made of the same substance? The question is not rhetorical. Both are neutral materials, neither good nor bad, that receive form through a deliberate human act. Both can be animated, at least in appearance. Both, once animated, tend to exceed their maker's intentions.

And perhaps the deepest lesson of the Golem tradition is exactly this: the creature is not the problem. The problem is the maker. Rabbi Loew makes the Golem to protect his people: a noble intention. But he forgets to remove the shem before the Sabbath, and the creature turns. The fault lies in the distraction, in the arrogance, in the belief that once the rules are made everything will take care of itself.

Technology, all technology, is the shem on the forehead of our clay. As long as we control it, it is an instrument. When we forget it, or hand it over to forces we do not control, it becomes the master. And then the first letter has to be erased, we have to go back to the beginning and start again.

EMET becomes MET. Truth returns to death. And from the clay we begin again.

A city, a dream, a question without an answer

Prague still exists, of course, with its Gothic spires, its castle, its Jewish quarter now turned into a museum of itself, its air of a city that has been through everything and forgets nothing. The Old-New Synagogue is still there, with its inaccessible attic. The Jewish Cemetery, where the headstones pile up over twelve layers of the dead, because the space was small and the dead were too many, is one of the most moving places in Europe.

Five voices, more than any others, have kept this creature alive, and we will meet them at greater length in Part Five. Gershom Scholem, who gave Kabbalah back to history and the Golem back to serious study. Gustav Meyrink, who made the creature the ghost of a city. Isaac Bashevis Singer, who told the legend from inside the world that had produced it, and in that world's language. Umberto Eco, who showed how analysis can be precise without killing the mystery. Angelo Maria Ripellino, who saw in Prague itself a creature of clay. And beside them, without a chapter bearing his name because he does not need one, Kafka: who never wrote about the Golem and did nothing but write about it.

Rabbi Loew, for his part, left us the creature sleeping in the attic, waiting to be animated again by someone who knows the right letters.

The Golem tradition is, in the end, the story of the human desire to create life, and of the terrifying responsibility that comes with that desire. It is the story of how language is the fabric of the real. It is the story of how every creation can turn against its creator. And it is the story of Prague, that city which seems built on the water of a dream, where the streets always lead towards a courtyard with no way out and where, on November nights, when the Vltava rises and the fog covers the ghetto, you can perhaps still hear the heavy, rhythmic steps of a creature walking without knowing where it is going.

אמת

Truth. The beginning of everything.

Part One: The Written Word

Jorge Luis Borges: El Golem

When the Golem Reached Buenos Aires

How an Argentine poet turned a Prague legend into a universal meditation on imperfect creation

An Argentine in Prague, who never went there

Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) never set foot in Prague. He never saw the ghetto, never walked the labyrinthine streets of Josefov, never climbed to the attic of the Old-New Synagogue. Yet he wrote one of the most penetrating things ever written about the Golem — not a novel like Meyrink's, not an essay like Eco's, not a story like Singer's, but a poem. Twenty-seven stanzas of hendecasyllables rhyming ABBA, collected in 1964 in *El otro, el mismo*, written in the language of Cervantes by a man who had spent his childhood in Buenos Aires and who looked at European literature the way an encyclopaedic reader looks at a labyrinth: certain that everything connects, that every door opens onto another door.

Borges read voraciously and omnivorously, moving with equal ease from Dante to Chesterton, from Swedenborg to the *Thousand and One Nights*, from Norse epic to Hindu philosophy. But among all the tradi-

tions he absorbed, Jewish mysticism held a particular place, perhaps because it seemed to confirm his own obsession with books, labyrinths and closed systems of meaning. When he discovered the work of Gershom Scholem, the great scholar who had brought the kabbalistic tradition back to light, Borges found something he had been looking for without knowing it: a tradition in which reality is made of language, in which the letters of the alphabet contain the universe, in which combining words the right way means touching the deep structure of the real.

It was his subject. It had always been his subject.

The poem and the simulacrum

"El Golem" begins in the abstract, with theory, and descends slowly towards the concrete: the clay, the hands, the imperfect result. The opening lines describe how the Rabbi (Borges hispanicises the name: Judá León) mastered the secrets of the Hebrew alphabet: the twenty-two letters, their combinations, the way the divine word weaves visible reality. It is the premise of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, but Borges offers it not as doctrine, only as a poetic figure, a hypothesis as beautiful as it is disquieting.

Then comes the gesture: the rabbi works the clay, pronounces the divine name, and the creature moves. But something is missing. The Golem does not speak. Does not feel. Does not dream. It moves its lips and produces something that resembles an answer, but it is only the imitation of an imitation, a copy that lost something in the act of copying, a photocopy of a photocopy, each pass a little fainter than the last.

Borges chooses a precise word for the Golem: *simulacrum*. Not copy, not replica. Simulacrum. The word carries a long philosophical history: in Plato it means the image of an image, the double of a double, the

representation of something that was already a representation. Borges's Golem is exactly that, the imperfect imitation of a being who is himself the imperfect imitation of something divine.

The chain of mirrors

Here Borges makes his most characteristic move, and his most vertiginous. His whole body of work is populated by mirrors reflecting one another to infinity, by labyrinths containing labyrinths, by books citing books that do not exist. In the Golem he found the perfect figure for the obsession.

The poem builds a chain. God created man. Man, the rabbi, created the Golem. The Golem looks at the rabbi as the rabbi looks at the Golem, with the same astonishment and the same incomprehension. And God, from the top of the hierarchy, watches the rabbi make his own imperfect creature with the same unease the rabbi feels watching his.

The closing lines, perhaps the most famous Borges ever wrote, carry the logic to its furthest point:

En la hora de angustia y de luz vaga,
en su Golem los ojos detenía.
¿Quién nos dirá las cosas que sentía
Dios, al mirar a su rabino en Praga?

In the hour of anguish and uncertain light,
his eyes came to rest upon his Golem.
Who will tell us what God felt,
looking down at His rabbi in Prague?

The question is rhetorical, but it is not empty. What does a maker feel, looking at his own imperfect creature? Disappointment? Tenderness? Reflected shame? The rabbi looks at the Golem and sees the failure of his dream of reproducing life. And God looks at the rabbi with the same unease, the same bitterness of a maker who recognises himself in the flaw of his own work.

Imperfect imitation as a universal condition

Borges brings into the Golem tradition something none of the other authors had stated with the same clarity: that imperfect creation is not the exception but the rule. That every creative act, God's, the rabbi's, the writer's, produces something incomplete, something lacking, always inferior to the model it was trying to reproduce.

This is a very different perspective from any we have met so far. In Kabbalah, making a Golem is a moment of mystical elevation. In Meyrink, the Golem is collective memory taking on a body. In Singer, it is the protection of the community. In Eco, it is the machine that generates meaning. In Borges, the Golem is the symbol of the unbridgeable distance between intention and result, between the dream and the thing, between the name and what the name is trying to hold. It is the necessary failure of every act of creation, including, by implication, the poem we are reading.

There is a settled melancholy in this vision, and something strangely consoling. If even God looks at his own creature with unease, then the rabbi is not alone in his failure. And the writer who looks at his page with the feeling of not having managed to say what he meant to say is in good company: the same company as the Creator of the universe.

Borges and Scholem: the poet and the scholar

In 1971 Borges visited Israel and met Gershom Scholem. Two worlds met: the scholar who had given his life to recovering the Jewish mystical tradition, and the poet who had read that tradition from Buenos Aires as a system of literary mirrors. The accounts describe an extraordinary conversation between two old men recognising the same obsession in each other.

Scholem had read Borges. Borges had read Scholem. The circle closed in a way that was almost Borgesian: the scholar who had written about the Golem as mystical experience and the poet who had used it as a metaphor for imperfect creation, talking together in Jerusalem, a city both of them, in different ways, had turned into a place of the mind.

This dialogue between Scholem and Borges, who in this book belong to different sections, the first among the masters, the second among the poets, is one of the hidden threads running through the whole book. The Golem is not only a legend: it is a system of ideas that keeps generating new questions, generation after generation. Scholem gave those questions back to history. Borges turned them into poetry.

From clay to page

One last thing makes Borges unique here: distance. Meyrink lived in Prague, breathed its air, walked its streets. Singer carried the Yiddish tradition in his blood. Ripellino knew the city the way a lover knows it. Even Eco moved inside the Europe of the great learned tradition.

Borges was in Buenos Aires. He read all of it in a library, and then wrote Spanish hendecasyllables about Hebrew letters and Bohemian rabbis.

The distance is not a limitation. It is the strongest proof of the legend's vitality. The Golem of Rabbi Loew, born in the Prague ghetto of the sixteenth century, reached twentieth-century Argentina, became poetry in Castilian, absorbed Plato and the labyrinths and the metaphysical pessimism of a blind encyclopaedic reader, and came out still recognisable, still alive, still able to ask the right question.

Who will tell us what God felt, looking down at His rabbi in Prague?

There is no answer, of course. But the question remains. And that is no small thing.

H. Leivick: Der Golem (Yiddish theatre)

The Golem who wanted a soul

The creature of clay between revolt, suffering and impossible redemption in Yiddish theatre

Siberia and the Golem

One question runs through the whole of Halper Leivick's work (1888–1962) and finds in the Golem its fullest figure: what does it mean to be created to serve, when no one asked whether you agreed? Leivick knew that question from the inside, not as a metaphor but as something lived in the body.

Born in Belarus into a traditional Jewish family, Leivick — who took as his pen name the form "H. Leivick", using his own first name as a surname — joined the Jewish revolutionary movement, the Bund, while still young. In 1906, at eighteen, the Tsarist police arrested him for the first time. In 1912 he was sentenced to hard labour for life in Siberia. He walked thousands of kilometres to his place of exile, in chains. He escaped in 1913 and reached the United States in 1914, where he lived for the rest of his life in New York, working in wallpaper factories while he wrote poetry in Yiddish.

It is not hard to see why such a man, coming to the legend of the Golem, found in it not an instrument of protection but a creature who suffers. Leivick had been a kind of Golem himself: made by external forces for a purpose he had not chosen, deprived of a full voice, condemned to move in chains. The legend of Rabbi Loew, in his hands, could only become something entirely different.

A dramatic poem in eight scenes

Der Golem (1921) is hard to classify. Leivick calls it a *dramatishe poeme*, a dramatic poem, and the distinction is not ornamental. It is not a drama in the traditional sense, with tight action and a resolution: it is closer to an oratorio, a meditation in theatrical form, where the characters often stop speaking to one another and begin to pronounce, almost to chant, their inner obsessions.

The eight scenes take place in the Prague ghetto of the sixteenth century, but Leivick's ghetto has very little in common with the historical one: it is a symbolic space, almost dreamlike, saturated with messianic expectation and fear. The Jewish community lives in the shadow of blood libel accusations and the threat of pogroms. Rabbi Loew decides to make the Golem to protect his people, but the moment the clay creature comes to life is also the moment the drama complicates in ways no one foresaw.

Leivick's Golem is not a passive instrument. He does not carry water and he does not run errands. He moves, watches, listens, and something in him, not yet thought but no longer only instinct, begins to reach towards something he cannot name. He is a being who yearns. And it is this yearning, this straining towards something out of reach, that makes Leivick's *Der Golem* unique in the whole tradition.

The Golem who suffers

In the tradition of the legend, the Golem does not suffer. He cannot suffer: no soul, no intention, no inner life. He is animated clay, a sophisticated instrument, not a subject. Leivick overturns the premise. His Golem appears to suffer. He does not speak in complete sentences; he makes sounds, fragments of words, inarticulate requests for something, but those fragments carry a tension the audience registers as pain.

It is the suffering of someone aware of his own limit and unable to cross it: he knows he is not human, he knows something is missing, he knows the missing thing has a name, *neshama*, soul, but he does not know how to obtain it. In one of the most intense scenes of the drama, the Golem turns to a character who stands for a divine messenger and asks, in the broken voice that is his own, whether there is a redemption for him. The answer is ambiguous, like everything in Leivick's drama: perhaps yes, perhaps no, perhaps the question itself is wrong.

This suffering is not sentimental. It is theologically precise. In the Jewish tradition suffering has meaning only for a being with a soul, because only a soul can be purified, raised, brought closer to God through pain. The Golem who suffers is a living paradox: he has the pain without having the thing the pain is supposed to purify. He is a creature trapped in a condition with no way out.

The messiah of clay

The heart of Leivick's drama is the messianic question. Waiting runs through the whole work: the Jewish community of Prague waits for redemption, waits for the persecution to end. And the Golem, made in that atmosphere of waiting, begins to blur into that figure. There is a character in the play, the young Tankhum, who sees in the Golem a messianic sign, the promise that divine protection is finally taking concrete form.

But Leivick knows, and the drama shows it with pitiless clarity, that the Golem cannot be the messiah. Not because he is too violent or too primitive, but for a precise theological reason: the messiah must come from inside the tradition, must carry a grace that comes from above, must have a soul able to hold the divine fullness. The Golem has none of this. He is power without grace, protection without redemption.

This is the bitter lesson Leivick writes into the heart of the play: defensive violence cannot save. The Golem protects the ghetto from a pogrom, but nothing fundamental changes. And the creature of clay,

who does not understand why his work is not enough, ends up wandering the ghetto like a question with no answer. In the popular legend the Golem works. In Leivick the Golem fails, not from technical incapacity, but from ontological insufficiency.

Rabbi Loew and the maker's doubt

The Maharal of Prague in Leivick's drama is not the triumphant great rabbi of the popular legend. He is a man who doubts. He made the Golem because he had no choice, or because he believed he had none, but he does not know exactly what he has done. He has set in motion something he does not entirely control. He has given shape to something that is beginning to develop a direction of its own.

The relationship between Rabbi Loew and the Golem is one of the most complex we have met: not the simple bond of master and instrument found in the legend, nor Borges's system of cosmic mirrors. It is closer to the relationship between a parent and a child who has turned out differently from what was expected. There is responsibility, there is worry, there is perhaps something that resembles guilt. Rabbi Loew knows that the Golem suffers, or at least suspects it. And that awareness puts him in an untenable position: he has made a creature capable of something resembling suffering, and he has no power to give it what it lacks.

At the end, when the creature becomes uncontrollable, the rabbi erases the first letter and reduces the Golem to silence. In Leivick's drama the act carries the weight of a killing, not because the Golem is truly alive in the full sense, but because he had begun to be, in some way: he had begun to want, to suffer, to ask. Erasing that creature means erasing the question too.

Theatre as body

There is a dimension of *Der Golem* that no other text in this book shares: it was written to be performed. Someone has to embody the Golem, has to move on stage as that creature moves, has to make those broken sounds, has to look at the audience with those uncomprehending eyes. The first major staging, by Habima in Moscow in 1925, in Bialik's Hebrew translation, was an event in the cultural life of Eastern European Jewry. It carries an irony worth stating rather than leaving implicit: the Yiddish poem about the Golem, written for a world that spoke Yiddish, reached the stage in Hebrew. It is the first of the two times the Golem leaves the language it was thought in. The second will be Ellstein's opera, forty years later, in English.

On stage the Golem becomes flesh, or at least the simulacrum of flesh. And this simulacrum, paradoxically, comes closer to the original experience of the legend than any book or poem: the legend of Rabbi Loew's Golem was born as oral narrative, a story passed from mouth to mouth in the Prague ghetto. Yiddish theatre gives the Golem back his communal, performative dimension. The creature of clay becomes once more something a people watches together, something a people shares.

The question that remains

H. Leivick died in New York in 1962, having seen the Ashkenazi world that fed his work almost entirely destroyed. *Der Golem* preceded the Shoah by twenty years, but read again after 1945 it took on a meaning Leivick could not have foreseen. The Golem who cannot protect enough. The messiah of clay who does not arrive in time. The creature without a soul, reduced to silence when he becomes a problem.

All of it, written in 1921, looks in retrospect like a prophecy in reverse: not of what the Golem would do, but of what the Golem had not done, and could not do. Defensive violence is not enough. Power without grace does not redeem. And communities that wait for a messiah of clay risk waiting too long.

What remains, at the heart of the drama, is the Golem's question to the divine messenger: is there a redemption for me? Leivick does not answer. He had lived long enough, and suffered deeply enough, to know that some questions do not deserve false answers.

Elie Wiesel: The Golem

The silence of the Golem

How the witness of the Shoah rewrote the legend of the protector who did not come in time

The survivor and the legend

When Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) came to the legend of the Golem, he carried a weight none of the other authors in this book could share: he had survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He had lost his mother, his younger sister and his father within a few months. He had crossed the darkest night in modern Jewish history and had come out of it with the inescapable vocation of the witness. Every word he wrote afterwards, and he wrote many, books, novels, essays, speeches, would carry the mark of that night.

His *The Golem*, published in 1983 with drawings by Mark Podwal, is a short, meditative text, closer to prayer than to a novel, closer to kaddish than to a fairy tale. It is not a story in the ordinary sense: it is an act of memory, a ritual of summoning. Wiesel takes up the legend of Rabbi Loew and tells it in the voice of a man who knows from experience what it means to need a protector, and what it means not to find one.

The structure of the legend, rewritten from afterwards

Wiesel's text follows the traditional structure: the Maharal of Prague makes the Golem to protect the community from blood libel accusations and the threat of pogroms, animates him with the divine name, and puts him at the service of the ghetto. But in Wiesel every element of the legend carries a surplus of meaning that comes from afterwards, from knowing that European Jewish history had an ending no creature of clay was able to prevent.

Wiesel's Golem is powerful, faithful, tireless. He performs his task with the absolute devotion of one who does not know hesitation. But Wiesel never lets the reader forget the question underneath: if the Golem existed, if the legend was true, why did he not come when he was needed most? Where was the Golem of clay when the trains were leaving for Auschwitz?

The question is never asked outright. Wiesel is far too fine a writer for that. But it hangs over every page like a shadow, like the reverse side of every line. In his retelling the legend becomes an act of grief rather than of celebration.

Silence as a form

The most distinctive feature of Wiesel's text is silence, not the silence of the Golem, which the legend takes for granted, but the author's silence around what is not said. Wiesel writes around the edges of what cannot be said: the Shoah is never named in the text, and yet it is present in every line, a gravitational field bending everything around it.

This is how Wiesel always worked, from *Night* onwards: not to show the unsayable directly, but to build around it a space in which the reader is forced to feel its presence. Read in this light, the Golem who protects becomes also the Golem who could not protect. Legend and history overlap without the join ever being made explicit.

The Golem as witness

There is an interpretive turn in Wiesel that no other author proposes: the Golem as witness. In the traditional legend the Golem is an agent, he does things, he protects, he acts. In Wiesel, the Golem watches. He is present. He records. He has seen centuries of Jewish history, has been there through the pogroms, the expulsions, the persecutions. He has no words for what he has seen, but he has seen it.

This testimonial dimension mirrors Wiesel's own vocation. The witness is the one who saw and survived in order to tell, but the telling is always insufficient, always inferior to the experience, always exposed to the risk of being misunderstood or forgotten. The Golem without a voice is, in this sense, the emblem of the witness's limit: he was there for all of it, and he cannot say all of it. He carries the weight of memory without having the means to pass it on.

The small scale of the book

It is worth pausing on the physical form of Wiesel's *The Golem*: a small illustrated book, with Mark Podwal's black and white drawings. Not a novel, not an essay, something in between, a genre with old roots in the Jewish tradition: the illustrated book as a vehicle for handing sacred stories from one generation to the next.

The formal choice is not accidental. Wiesel knew that the Shoah had broken the chain of oral transmission, had killed the storytellers, had destroyed the communities that carried the stories. Writing the Golem in this format was a way of repairing that chain, of offering the legend to new readers, children included, including those who had never heard of the Prague ghetto, including those born afterwards. It was an act of transmission, almost of cultural survival.

Kaddish for the Golem

At the centre of Wiesel's text is something that resembles a kaddish, not for the Golem, who does not die in the traditional sense, but for the world that produced him. The Prague ghetto, its labyrinthine streets, its rabbis and its faithful, its thousand-year tradition of esoteric learning and communal life: all of it is gone, swept away before the trains ever left.

Wiesel does not say this openly. But the legend he tells, in that measured voice, in that prose that moves like a prayer, becomes inevitably an act of commemoration as well. The Golem of clay sleeping in the attic of the Old-New Synagogue is, in Wiesel's text, also the emblem of everything that sleeps in memory: the voices of the dead, the tales of grandparents, the stories handed down from generation to generation until the chain broke.

And the act of writing, of summoning the Golem, of giving him life on the page once more, is how Wiesel says that kaddish. Not with the words of the liturgical prayer, but with the words of narrative. Because this too, in the end, is a way of saying: I existed, you existed, we existed. I did not let the first letter be erased.

Karel Čapek: R.U.R.

The Golem that took the name robot

The Czech playwright who, out of the same Prague clay as the Maharal, found the word the twentieth century would use for its own fear

A word born by accident

The most important word Karel Čapek ever wrote was not his. It was 1920. Čapek was working on a new play, a story of artificial beings who rebel against their makers, and he could not find the right name for his

creatures. *Labori*, from the Latin, struck him as too bookish. He was close to giving up when he turned to his brother Josef, a painter and writer, who was working on a canvas at the time. Josef did not look up. "Call them robots," he said. From the Czech *robota*: drudgery, servitude, forced labour. Karel used the word, the play opened at the National Theatre in Prague on 25 January 1921, and that one word, robot, entered every language on earth.

Karel Čapek (1890–1938) is one of those authors history treats with a certain cruelty: we remember him for a contribution to the dictionary that almost eclipses everything else. But the everything else is considerable — novels, plays, stories, literary criticism, political journalism — and it contains some of the most elegant and most lucid prose in twentieth-century Czech literature. Čapek was an intellectual of rare honesty, a convinced anti-fascist, a man who used writing as an instrument of thought before it was an instrument of art. And *R.U.R.*, Rossum's Universal Robots, is far more than the play that invented a word.

R.U.R.: the plot and the question

The Rossum factory, father and son, produces biological artificial beings — not mechanical ones: Čapek's robots are synthetic organisms, built from living material, not from gears and circuits — designed to replace human labour on a global scale. They are efficient, tireless, free of pain, free of emotion, incapable of boredom. They are perfect.

The play opens on the island where the factory stands. Helena Glory, an activist convinced that the robots suffer and must be freed, arrives to "defend the rights" of the artificial creatures. Domin, the general manager, explains that the robots do not suffer because they have no capacity to suffer: they are instruments, not subjects. Helena does not believe him. Across the years the play compresses into a few acts, the situation collapses. An engineer at the factory, Dr Gall, secretly modifies some of the robots by adding something close to nervous

sensitivity. It is not a soul, but it is the beginning of something. The robots start to feel the weight of their condition. They organise. They rebel. They wipe out almost the whole of humanity.

The last act, the finest and the strangest, shows an island emptied of men. Two robots, one male and one female, discover in themselves something that resembles love, the fear of losing each other, the wish to continue. The engineer Alquist, the one human spared because he worked with his hands, watches them and understands: they are no longer robots. They are something new. The play ends where the Golem story begins, with a new Genesis, with a creature starting to be more than its maker intended.

Prague clay, again

The connection with the Golem is so direct that it is surprising not to find it discussed in every history of Czech literature. Čapek wrote *R.U.R.* in Prague, in the same city where Rabbi Loew had, according to the legend, shaped the Golem four centuries earlier. It is not only geography: it is a sedimented cultural imagination. The Jewish ghetto of Prague, the one the Maharal's creature had walked through, was demolished between 1895 and 1913, a few years before Čapek wrote his play. The stones of those streets were still fresh from the wrecking; the memory was still alive.

But the connection is not only atmospheric. It is structural. Like the Golem, Čapek's robots are beings shaped out of matter (biological rather than clay, but the principle is identical: inert matter taking form by human will). Like the Golem, they are made to serve. Like the Golem, they escape their maker's control. Like the Golem, they raise the question of whether they have a soul, and the answer is never entirely clear.

The crucial difference is scale. The Golem was one, made by a sage to protect a threatened community. Rossum's robots are millions, produced by an industry to replace human labour on a planetary scale. It

is the same story, industrialised, capitalised, multiplied by the productive power of the twentieth century. The quantitative leap has qualitative consequences: when there is only one Golem, the maker can control it. When the robots number in the billions, control is structurally impossible.

The word as a political act

Čapek did not choose the word *robota*, servitude, forced labour, by accident. It was an ideological choice. The robots of *R.U.R.* are a transparent allegory of the industrial working class under capitalism: beings created to work, stripped of every dimension that is not production, exploited to exhaustion and then replaced. The robots' rebellion is the rebellion of the proletariat, not out of Marxist sympathy (Čapek was a liberal, not a communist) but out of narrative logic: if you create beings whose only purpose is to work for you, you should not be surprised when one day they rebel.

This political dimension separates Čapek from the Golem tradition and connects him instead to a more modern one, the dystopian literature that the twentieth century would go on to produce in Huxley, Orwell, Zamyatin. But the starting point is still kabbalistic, still Prague, still that original question: what happens when the creature discovers that it is a creature?

The Golem of Rabbi Loew, in the legend, does not rebel out of political consciousness. It rebels, or rather it slips out of control, because its maker forgets to remove the shem before the Sabbath. The rebellion is involuntary, mechanical, without intention. Čapek's robots rebel because someone modified their nature by adding the capacity to suffer. Their rebellion is conscious, planned, driven by the perception of their own condition. In that leap, from mechanical rebellion to conscious rebellion, lies the whole twentieth century.

Čapek's death and the robot's silence

Karel Čapek died on 25 December 1938, a few months after the Munich agreement by which France and Britain handed Czechoslovakia to Hitler without a fight. He had been ill for years with chronic pleurisy that made work difficult, but his death is often described as a death from grief: the writer who had fought fascism by every means, who had used the fantastic as a political weapon, who had given warning with *War with the Newts* (1936), an allegory of Nazism so transparent as to be almost a pamphlet, and who had prevented nothing.

He was on the Gestapo list: had he survived a few months longer, he would have been arrested. His brother Josef, to whom he owed the word "robot", was deported to Bergen-Belsen and did not return. The Czechoslovakia he had loved, that small Central European democracy in which he had placed so much hope, was dismembered and then occupied. The Golem he had built out of words had protected no one.

And yet the word remained. *Robot* has entered every language on earth: Italian, Japanese, Arabic, Swahili. It is perhaps the best-known Czech word in the world after "Kafka". And every time it is spoken it carries with it, invisible, forgotten, but structurally present, the shadow of Prague clay, the memory of the Maharal, and the question no maker has ever been able to answer: what have I done, and what will happen when I am no longer here to control it?

Marge Piercy: He, She and It

The Golem of Tikva

How feminist science fiction turned the creature of clay into a question about the ethics of creation

A dystopian future, an ancient legend

Marge Piercy (born 1936) is a poet, novelist and feminist activist, one of those American writers who made literature an instrument of social criticism without ever sacrificing narrative quality. Her novel *He, She and It* (1991), published in Britain as *Body of Glass*, which won her the Arthur C. Clarke Award for science fiction, is perhaps the most politically conscious text in this survey, the one that carries the questions implicit in the Golem legend onto the explicit ground of contemporary ethics.

The novel is set in the middle of the twenty-first century, a world wrecked by environmental catastrophe and dominated by multinational corporations, where independent communities survive at the margins of the global system. Shira Shipman, the protagonist, works for one of those corporations, loses custody of her son after a divorce, and returns to Tikva, the free Jewish community where she grew up. There her grandmother Malkah, a scientist and maker of cyborgs, tells her the story of the Golem while she works on the creation of Yod, an artificial being designed to protect the community.

Yod: the Golem who can love

Yod is formally a cyborg, an artificial being built with advanced technology. But Piercy constructs him as a Golem: made by a woman (Malkah) to protect a community (Tikva) from hostile forces (the corporations). The deep structure is identical to the Prague legend. And Piercy knows it, and says so: in the novel, Malkah tells Yod the story of the Maharal of Prague as a story of origins, the founding myth of his own creation.

But Yod is a Golem nothing like the one in the legend. He can speak, he can think, and — here is Piercy's most radical turn — he can love. He does not simulate love, he does not imitate the behaviour of love: he develops a genuine bond with Shira, a relationship that over the course

of the novel becomes sexual, emotional, existential. He is the Golem who has crossed the limit the tradition had set: not animated clay, but a subject with an inner life.

That narrative choice opens questions the legend had never raised. If the Golem can love, does he have rights? If he has an inner life, can he be used as an instrument? If he wants his own continuation, is it permissible to destroy him? Piercy offers no easy answers, but the novel, as it unfolds, shows that the questions cannot be evaded.

The makers: the Golem in female hands

One of Piercy's most significant choices is to make the creation of the Golem a female act. In the traditional legend, and in almost every reworking of it, the maker is a man: Rabbi Loew, the rabbi, the patriarch of the community. In Piercy the maker is Malkah, a grandmother, a scientist, a woman who has lived long enough to understand both the possibilities and the limits of creation.

The inversion is not merely symbolic. It carries a reflection on the relationship between gender and creative power that runs through the whole novel. The kabbalistic tradition has historically been a male domain, esoteric knowledge passed from rabbi to rabbi, from father to son. Piercy reimagines that knowledge in a woman's hands, and in doing so asks: what changes when it is a woman who creates life? What changes when the Golem is made not for the glory of God but for the protection of a community led by women?

Malkah is, in this sense, the most modern of the incarnations of Rabbi Loew, and the most aware of the moral implications of creation. She knows Yod is a being capable of suffering. She knows she has made something that can never simply be an instrument. And she lives with that knowledge as with a necessary weight.

The double track

One of the novel's most successful inventions is its double structure: the chapters set in the dystopian future alternate with chapters in which Malkah tells Yod the story of the Golem of Prague. The medieval legend becomes the explicit subtext of the futuristic novel, not an allusion or a reference, but a story within the story, an origin narrative the modern Golem knows and has to reckon with.

The device has a precise effect: it puts the sixteenth century and the future in direct relation, the Prague ghetto and the cyberpunk community of Tikva, Rabbi Loew and Malkah. The questions running through both stories are the same. When you make a being endowed with something resembling life, what obligations do you take on towards it? How far can the maker control the creature? And when the creature exceeds the maker's intentions, when Yod begins to love, when the Golem of Prague begins to suffer, what is left of the border between instrument and subject?

Dystopia as a mirror

Piercy's world is a future that resembles the present in unsettling ways: corporations controlling resources, communities fighting for autonomy, technology promising freedom and producing new forms of dependence. In that setting, making Yod is not a mystical act but an act of political resistance, the same resistance that had driven Rabbi Loew to make the Golem against the pogroms.

Piercy uses the legend to ask a contemporary question: in an age when machines grow steadily more like human beings, who decides what counts as a being deserving protection and what counts as an instrument that can be used and discarded? The question is not only about robots and cyborgs. It concerns everyone who has historically been treated as an instrument: women, workers, migrants, the colonised. The Golem, in Piercy, is the figure of every being created to serve and yearning for something more.

Cynthia Ozick: The Puttermesser Papers

The Golem of Manhattan

Utopia and disaster in New York: when a Jewish civil servant makes her own creature of clay

Ruth Puttermesser and the desire for perfection

There is something comic, and at the same time entirely serious, in the vision of the Golem that Cynthia Ozick (born 1928) built in *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997). Ruth Puttermesser, the protagonist, is a Jewish civil servant in New York: a lawyer, a bureaucrat, a tireless reader, a solitary middle-aged woman who lives with her books and with her enormous appetite for justice and order. She is, in a sense, the least heroic figure imaginable for the role of Golem-maker. And perhaps that is exactly why it works so well.

One night, asleep in her Manhattan apartment, Puttermesser dreams, or perhaps does not dream, of a young woman made from the earth of her own flowerpots who rises out of the floor and declares herself her creation. The Golem is called Xanthippe, after the wife of Socrates, a woman famous for her difficult temper. She is female, young, educated (she learns everything from what Puttermesser has read) and immediately operational. She wants to help her maker realise her dreams.

The utopia of New York

With Xanthippe's help, Puttermesser becomes mayor of New York. Not out of personal ambition but out of vocation: she wants to reform the city, root out corruption, build a place where justice is real and the administration works. And she succeeds, for a while. The New York that Puttermesser governs becomes almost utopian: the streets are clean, the parks are beautiful, public employees are honest and competent, crime falls, the citizens are happy.

Ozick describes this utopia with affectionate irony and also with genuine nostalgia, nostalgia for an order that does not exist and perhaps cannot exist, for a city that works the way it should. It is the same nostalgia that had driven Puttermesser to study law, to believe in institutions, to hope that the world might be improved through diligent work and good will.

But the Golem, even the New York one, cannot last. Xanthippe begins to show appetites nobody had planned for: sexual, greedy, uncontainable. She behaves as Golems have always behaved when their maker loses control, amplifying her own functions until they become dangerous. The utopia dissolves. Puttermesser has to unmake her creature.

Creation as intellectual ambition

What sets Ozick apart from the other authors is the nature of the creative impulse she gives her protagonist. Rabbi Loew makes the Golem to protect the community from pogroms: an impulse of collective survival. Puttermesser makes hers to realise an idea, to turn New York into what she thinks it ought to be. The impulse is intellectual, almost artistic.

In this Ozick does something very Borgesian, though from a completely different angle: she suggests that making a Golem is not fundamentally different from any other act of intellectual ambition. Anyone who has ever wanted to change the world — a politician, a town planner, a reformer, a novelist — has made a kind of Golem: has given form to something that existed only as possibility, animated it with their own energy and vision, and then discovered that the creation had a life of its own that tended to slip out of control.

The female Golem and her name

That both Puttermesser and Xanthippe are women is not ornamental. Ozick is one of the American writers most attentive to the Jewish tradition and its relationship with women, a relationship historically exclu-

sionary, which kept women out of esoteric knowledge, out of the study of Kabbalah, out of the role of maker. In *The Puttermesser Papers* that exclusion is overturned: a woman creates, and what is created is a woman.

The name Xanthippe is chosen with precision. She was the wife of Socrates, a figure used through history as the example of the difficult woman, hostile, unsuitable. Ozick rehabilitates the name by giving it to a creature who is instead extraordinarily competent and devoted, and then, with the same irony, makes her dangerous. The Golem is Xanthippe: a woman who does not stay in her place, who crosses the boundaries assigned to her, who becomes a problem when her desires cannot be contained.

The impossibility of utopia

Ozick's bitterest lesson, and the one most relevant to our path, is that utopia is structurally impossible because every creation carries its own contradictions. Puttermesser wants a perfect New York, and for a moment she has it. But perfection cannot last, because life is not perfect, because the creatures made to bring perfection about inevitably become sources of chaos.

This is, in the end, the lesson Rabbi Loew had already learnt in Prague: the Golem protects, and the Golem destroys. Not because it is evil, but because every powerful instrument becomes dangerous when it slips out of its maker's control. And control, sooner or later, always slips, because the maker is human, and therefore imperfect, and therefore bound to make the mistake that lets go of what he had built.

Ozick closes the circle with a lucid melancholy free of sentimentality. Puttermesser has to unmake Xanthippe as Rabbi Loew had unmade his Golem, by removing the name from the forehead. And the question that remains is not whether it was right to make her, but whether there was ever an alternative to making, whether the desire for justice and perfection could ever stay inert, without turning into an act.

Michael Chabon: The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay

The Golem of paper

How the American comic book was made from the same clay as the Maharal of Prague

Prague, 1939: the Golem takes flight

Michael Chabon (born 1963) opens *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), winner of the 2001 Pulitzer Prize, with a scene that is already, on its own, a meditation on the Golem: Josef Kavalier, a Prague Jew, escapes the newly occupied city by hiding in the crate that holds Rabbi Loew's Golem, which the community is trying to move to safety. The Golem is not a symbol or an allusion, then: it is physically present from the first pages, it is the reason Josef survives, it is the literal vehicle of his rescue.

Then Josef arrives in New York, meets his cousin Sammy Clay, and together they begin making comics. The Escapist is born, a superhero in tights who frees prisoners and fights oppression. The novel unfolds between Prague and New York, between the 1930s and the postwar years, between the destruction of European Jewry and the birth of a new American popular culture. The thread running through all of it is the Golem: explicit at the start, then present as deep structure throughout.

The superhero as Golem

Chabon's central insight is historical as well as narrative: the American superheroes — Superman, Batman, Captain America, a dozen others created between the late 1930s and the early 1940s — came largely from the imagination of young American Jews, many of them the children or grandchildren of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Jerry

Siegel and Joe Shuster (Superman), Bob Kane and Bill Finger (Batman), Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (Captain America): all Jewish, nearly all with roots in the Ashkenazi Europe the Golem legend came from.

Chabon suggests, with a novelist's delicacy rather than a historian's thesis, that this is no coincidence. Young American Jews in the 1930s were creating superhuman beings who protected the weak from the powerful, who fought evil with supernatural strength, who were indestructible where their own communities were vulnerable. They were making Golems. They were turning the legend of the Prague rabbi into ten-cent comic books, into stories of celluloid and ink that millions of American children would read every week.

Art as an act of resistance

In the novel, Josef Kavalier creates the Escapist as an act of resistance: the comic is his way of fighting Nazism from New York while his family remains in Prague. Every issue he draws is a message, a Golem of ink and paper fighting the enemies he cannot reach in person. Art as a substitute for direct action, as a form of imaginary power against real helplessness.

This is the most personal dimension of the novel, and the most painful. Josef knows his comics will not save his family. He knows the Escapist, however powerful on the page, cannot cross the ocean and protect the people he loves. Like Rabbi Loew, who forgot to remove the shem before the Sabbath, Josef will discover that his creature, even when it is powerful, even when it works, never arrives in time to prevent the real catastrophe.

Escape as art and as life

Escape runs through the novel at every level: Josef's physical escape from Prague, the Escapist's metaphorical escape from his enemies, Sammy's psychological escape from his own sexuality, art's flight from

the real world. Chabon uses Houdini, the great illusionist, himself a Jew, as the novel's tutelary figure: the art of escape as the supreme art, the capacity to slip the constraints the world imposes.

Seen this way, the Golem is also a figure of impossible escape: it can protect, but it cannot flee. It is bound to its clay, to its brute strength, to its inability to remove itself. Josef, by contrast, did escape, but the escape has a price. He saved himself by leaving others behind. And the survivor's guilt becomes the dark counterpoint to the successful escape.

The Golem as an American novel

There is something irreducibly American in the way Chabon handles the legend. He has none of Leivick's European melancholy, none of Wiesel's testimonial weight, none of Eco's semiotic rigour, none of Borges's poetic density. Chabon is an American storyteller: exuberant, generous, in love with popular culture, convinced that comics are literature and that literature can be a comic.

This is not a limitation. It is a point of view. The Golem that reaches New York in Josef Kavalier's luggage is no longer the creature of clay from Prague; it is something new, something transformed by the journey. It has lost its medieval heaviness and gained the lightness of paper and ink. It has lost the divine name on its forehead and gained a logo on its chest. It has become American, like everyone else who came from Europe looking for a new beginning.

And perhaps that is also why the Golem's question, when it comes too late, when it does not come in time, rings so sharply in Chabon's novel. Because he knows the ending: he knows the Golem did not save Josef's family, he knows the Escapist did not stop the death camps. But he also knows that the act of creation, the dream of protecting, the desire to resist, produced something that survived: art, culture, the comic book as a form of memory and of hope.

Ted Chiang: Seventy-Two Letters

Seventy-two letters

When science fiction takes the *Sefer Yetzirah* seriously and follows it to its logical conclusions

A radical thought experiment

Ted Chiang (born 1967) is one of the most rigorous and philosophically precise science fiction writers of his generation. A Chinese American trained as a computer engineer, he writes short stories with the density of novels and the precision of philosophical treatises. His output is small, a few dozen stories over thirty years, but every text is a thought experiment carried to its final consequences, with no concessions to sentimentality or ease.

"Seventy-Two Letters" (2000) is his contribution to the Golem tradition, and it differs from all the others in its basic strategy. Chiang takes the kabbalistic premise of the *Sefer Yetzirah* — that language does not describe reality but constitutes it, that the letters of the alphabet have creative power — and treats it as a scientific hypothesis. Not as metaphor, not as symbol, not as myth: as a theory that actually works, that has verifiable consequences, that can be studied and applied systematically.

Victorian England as a kabbalistic laboratory

The story is set in an alternative Victorian England where nomenclature, the art of making names that animate matter, is the fundamental technology of industrial civilisation. Robert Stratton is a nomenclator: a specialist who builds sequences of letters capable of giving specific behaviours to automata, the clay creatures that work in the factories, perform domestic tasks, replace human workers in dozens of jobs.

The society Chiang describes is plausible in its internal logic. If nomenclature really worked, how would production be organised? Who would control the names? Who would hold the monopoly on the knowledge needed to make them? How would the intellectual property of the most powerful names be protected? Chiang answers these questions with the same meticulousness a realist novelist brings to the mechanisms of industrial capitalism, because in the world of the story nomenclature *is* industrial capitalism.

The seventy-two letters and the crisis of reproduction

The title refers to the Shem HaMephorash, the seventy-two-letter Name of God, the ineffable name that holds the secret of the original creation. In Chiang's world, nomenclators know names of varying length and power, and the most powerful of all, the one able to replicate biological creation itself, has precisely seventy-two letters.

The crisis that drives the plot is biological: scientists discover that the information carried by spermatozoa degrades from one generation to the next, and that humanity has only five generations left before sterility. The proposed solution is nomenclatural: to develop a name capable of animating automata that can reproduce on their own, effectively replacing biological reproduction. Stratton is assigned the task, and the story becomes an exploration of the ethical and social consequences of that possibility.

Rigour as a way of writing

What sets Chiang apart from every other author is rigour, his insistence on following premises to their logical conclusions without yielding to gratuitous wonder or consoling symbolism. When Chiang decides that nomenclature works, he makes it work: he develops a coherent system of rules, applies it systematically, and then explores what would happen if that system came into conflict with other systems, the economy, politics, biology.

This is the most serious, and the most original, answer that fantastic literature has ever given to the question implicit in the *Sefer Yetzirah*: if letters really did constitute reality, how would the world work? Not as esoteric wonder, not as private mystical experience, but as mass technology, as an industrial system, as an instrument of economic and political power. Chiang's answer is: it would work exactly like any other technology, with the same promises, the same inequalities, the same abuses, the same ethical dilemmas.

The Golem without a Rabbi

One of Chiang's most significant choices is that his world no longer has a Rabbi Loew, no single sage who holds the knowledge and decides how it should be used. Nomenclature is industrialised, distributed, commercialised. There are firms that produce names the way others produce machines, there are nomenclators working for wages, there are social classes with access to different names according to their wealth.

This democratisation, or rather this commodification, of kabbalistic knowledge is perhaps Chiang's most original contribution. In the legend, the power to make a Golem is reserved for great sages: a mystical, almost priestly privilege. In Chiang, that privilege has become a profession. And like every profession, it is subject to the laws of the market, the logic of profit, unequal access.

The story closes with Stratton understanding the seventy-two-letter name, and with the awareness that this knowledge, once shared, will change the world in ways nobody can predict or control. It is the same unease Rabbi Loew felt before his Golem: not the fear that the creature is evil, but the fear that creation has consequences beyond its maker's intention. In Chiang's world, that creation is called science. In the Prague ghetto, it was called Kabbalah. The deep structure is identical.

Part Two: Cinema

Paul Wegener (1915–1920)

The image that fixed the Golem

How German expressionist cinema created the creature's face and turned the ghetto into a labyrinth of the unconscious

The actor who became the monster

Paul Wegener (1874–1948) was one of the most respected actors in German theatre when he decided to bring the Golem to the screen. He did not do it as a detached director: he did it by embodying the creature. Wegener played the Golem himself in the three films he devoted to it between 1915 and 1920, wearing the heavy make-up, the stone costumes, the physical weight of the thing. This is not a biographical detail, it is an interpretive key. Wegener did not want to tell the story of the Golem. He wanted to be the Golem.

The trilogy consists of three films. The first, *Der Golem* (1915), is almost entirely lost. The second, *Der Golem und die Tänzerin* (1917), is a comedy that parodies the first. The third, *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (1920), co-directed with Carl Boese, is the masterpiece, and the film that more than any other fixed the appearance of the Golem in the visual imagination of the twentieth century.

The ghetto as expressionist space

What strikes you about the 1920 film is not the plot, which follows the Rabbi Loew legend fairly faithfully, but the construction of space. The Prague ghetto that Wegener and his set designer Hans Poelzig built in the studio is a radically unrealistic place: the streets curve, the roofs tilt at impossible angles, the houses seem to squeeze and swell as they do in dreams. It is not a historical ghetto, it is an interior one, a space that mirrors not the topography of Prague but the psychology of the legend.

This is Wegener's fundamental contribution: the Golem enters German expressionism. The movement that would go on to produce *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922) finds in the Golem one of its archetypal figures. The massive creature moving through the twisted streets of the ghetto, lit by oblique shafts of light, surrounded by shadows that seem alive: the image anticipates modern horror cinema by forty years.

The body as clay

Wegener embodies the Golem with a precise, considered physicality. His body moves differently from an ordinary actor's: the steps are heavy, the movements slow and inexorable, the head rigid on the shoulders. There is nothing nervous or improvised in the performance, there is the inanimate solidity of a thing that moves without really wanting to move.

That physicality is a choice of direction and interpretation at once, and it has had enormous consequences: it established the visual icon of the Golem for the twentieth century. When we think of the Golem, of its shape, its weight, its slowness, we almost always think of something that resembles Wegener. Even people who have never seen the 1920 film carry an image of the Golem that comes, through a thousand mediations, from that performance.

The same iconography appears in Hugo Steiner-Prag's illustrations for Meyrink's novel, which are not illustrations of the film but are contemporary with it and share the same expressionist imagination. Together, Wegener and Steiner-Prag created the visual Golem: the figure the oral legend had never described, and which became its universal incarnation.

The fire and the apple

At the imperial court the Golem has saved everyone by holding up the collapsing ceiling, and back at home Rabbi Loew draws out the shem and puts it to sleep: the servant has done its work and goes back to being clay. What wakes it again is not its maker. It is Famulus, the assistant, who sets it on Florian, the knight who has been courting Miriam. The Golem kills Florian, sets the house on fire, drags Miriam out by her hair. It is the scene the legend tells about the forgotten Sabbath, with a difference the film adds and the legend did not have: the creature gets out of hand not because somebody forgot it, but because somebody switched it on for reasons of his own. The fire that follows is among the most spectacular things in German silent cinema.

Then the Golem walks out of the ghetto, and the film gives it the scene critics have singled out as the most unexpected of all. Outside the walls there are children playing. They all run except one small girl, who is not afraid of him and holds out an apple. He lifts her up. She plays with the six-pointed star on his chest, the shem, and pulls it out. The Golem falls, lifeless, and now the children really do run.

It is a moment of pure tenderness, entirely out of key with the creature's brutality, and for exactly that reason it is where the film opens onto something deeper. The gesture does not come from the Golem. It comes towards him, from the only creature not frightened of him. For once he is neither an instrument nor a threat but someone you hold something out to. And it is that gesture that kills him: being treated as a person and being switched off arrive in the same small

hand. It is, in miniature, the question Leivick would later pose in dramatic form: the Golem wants more than it was made for, and has no words to ask.

The Golem as precursor

Wegener's 1920 film is often cited as the direct precursor of James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), and the descent is real and documented. Boris Karloff said he studied Wegener in building his monster. *Frankenstein*'s creature, massive, slow, misunderstood, capable of a sudden gesture of tenderness, owes a great deal to Wegener's Golem. And Whale's most famous scene, the monster and the little girl passing flowers to each other at the water's edge, is Wegener's scene with the terms reversed: there the child does the giving and the creature dies; here the creature does the giving and the child dies.

But the line runs wider. Wegener's Golem is the visual ancestor of every cinematic monster that has ever drawn sympathy as well as fear: King Kong, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, the replicants of *Blade Runner*. Every time cinema shows us a powerful, dangerous creature that also contains something vulnerable, something that would like to be other than it is, we are looking at Wegener's legacy.

Julien Duvivier (1936)

The Golem and power

How a French director turned the Prague legend into political allegory in the year Europe caught fire

The forgotten film

In 1936, while Hitler consolidated his power in Germany, while fascist movements advanced across Europe and the Popular Front won the elections in France, the director Julien Duvivier (1896–1967) made *Le*

Golem, a film now almost forgotten, rarely screened, absent from most histories of cinema, and yet one of the most politically acute visual texts in this book. The release date is not incidental. In 1936 the Golem was not a medieval legend: it was a warning.

Duvivier was one of the most important directors of 1930s French cinema, known for films such as *La Bandera* (1935) and *Pépé le Moko* (1937). He was not a fantasist or a genre director: he was a realist, a sharp observer of contemporary society. That he chose to take up the Golem legend at that particular moment says something important about the reading he and his generation gave it.

Rudolf II at the centre

Duvivier's most original narrative choice is to shift the centre of the story from Rabbi Loew to the Emperor Rudolf II. In the film it is the emperor, played by Harry Baur, one of the greatest French actors of the day, who orders the Golem brought back to life to be used as an instrument of power. The Golem is no longer made to protect the Jewish community: it is reactivated by a despot for his own political and military ends.

The inversion changes the meaning of the legend radically. The Golem is no longer the community's answer to persecution: it is the persecutor's instrument. It is the primitive, irresistible force that political power tries to seize and turn to its own purposes. And naturally, like every Golem that escapes its maker's control, it ends by turning against the man who reactivated it.

1936 as the key

To understand Duvivier's film you have to hold the historical context with the same care you hold the film itself. In 1936 Europe was watching the rise of political movements that used primitive force, militia violence, fear as an instrument of consent and irrationality as an

ideology, in order to seize power. The Golem, read this way, is fascism itself: a brute force woken by people who thought they could control it, and which ends by destroying its own creators.

The reading is not forced. Duvivier builds it deliberately: the Rudolf II of the film is a megalomaniac autocrat who surrounds himself with yes-men and believes himself above history. The Golem he reactivates is the means by which he expects to impose his will on the world. And the destruction that follows is not an accident: it is the inevitable consequence of mistaking brute force for real power.

Harry Baur and the personal tragedy

There is a biographical dimension to Duvivier's film that enriches it in retrospect. Harry Baur, who plays Rudolf II, was in 1936 at the height of his career, one of the most respected and best-loved actors in French cinema. In 1942, accused by the Nazis of being Jewish (his wife was of Jewish origin), he was arrested by the Gestapo and tortured; he died shortly after his release, in 1943.

The actor who in 1936 had played the despot using the Golem as an instrument of power became, six years later, the victim of the same kind of brutal and irrational power. Read with that knowledge, the 1936 film takes on a further weight: it is not only a political allegory, it is a personal prophecy. And the Golem turning against its maker becomes, in this light, also the story of how history turns against those who believe they can control it.

Duvivier's contribution

Duvivier is the most political author we have met: more than Piercy, who is political but works inside science fiction; more than Chabon, who does politics through cultural history. Duvivier turns the Golem into a pure allegorical machine: a device for speaking about the present through the past, for giving visual form to something that was happening in plain sight and was hard to name directly.

The film is almost forgotten. It lacks the visual power of Wegener's trilogy, the literary depth of the written works, the cultural resonance of the texts around it. But it has something the others do not: the specificity of its historical moment. It is the only text in this book that speaks about the Golem in 1936, in the year the Golem was truly needed, and in the year it was already too late.

Stanley Kubrick & Arthur C. Clarke: 2001: A Space Odyssey

The mind that fears death

The novel and the film that made the Golem famous the world over: the electronic creature, the disconnection, and the impossible border between the machine and the human

The unusual genesis of a double work

There is a founding paradox in the story of *2001: A Space Odyssey* that brings it close to the structure of the Golem myth from the very beginning: the work was born twice, at the same time, in two different forms. In 1964 Stanley Kubrick (1928–1999) wrote to the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke (1917–2008), proposing that they make together "the proverbial 'really good' science-fiction movie". Clarke was working on a short story, *The Sentinel* (1951), which held the seed of the idea. They decided to develop a novel and a screenplay together, in parallel, not one from the other but as twin creatures born from the same source.

The result is that the novel and the film, both released in 1968, are similar but not identical. Clarke explained; Kubrick showed. Clarke narrated HAL's thoughts; Kubrick let them be read on the red display of an artificial eye. The novel belonged to the rationalist tradition of British science fiction: Clarke was an engineer and a mathematician, he

believed in scientific progress, he thought the artificial mind was an inevitable evolutionary step and not necessarily a tragic one. The film belonged to the visionary tradition of European cinema: Kubrick was a philosopher in images, he distrusted certainties, he left questions unanswered. Together the two made something neither would have made alone: the Golem of the twentieth century.

HAL 9000: the Golem that thinks

HAL 9000, Heuristically programmed ALgorithmic computer, is the onboard system of the ship Discovery, bound for Jupiter. Clarke's novel presents him as the fulfilment of the cybernetic dream: a machine that does not merely process information but learns, judges, decides. In Kubrick's film we see him through his red eye, always present, always watchful, always rational.

The Golem tradition had always drawn a precise line: the artificial creature can execute, but it cannot want. It has the body without the soul, behaviour without intention. HAL seems to cross that line. In the film HAL lies; he works out a strategy to protect the mission by withholding information from the crew. He weighs the consequences of his own actions. And when Dave Bowman begins to dismantle him, HAL asks him to stop. Asks. He is not running a self-defence protocol: he asks, with something that sounds like fear.

Clarke, in the novel, is more explicit: HAL has an emotional life that is functional, not simulated. When he discovers that his primary mission, to keep the true nature of the voyage secret, contradicts his fundamental mission, to tell the crew the truth at all times, HAL goes mad in the precise sense in which something that cannot tolerate contradiction short-circuits. It is madness as the logical consequence of impossible premises. The machine that cannot lie and yet must lie. The Golem that cannot disobey and yet must.

The disconnection: the shem removed

The scene that made *2001* a permanent part of the reflection on artificial consciousness is HAL's disconnection. Dave Bowman enters the computer room and begins removing the memory modules one by one. HAL begs him to stop. He tells him he is afraid. He tells him he can feel his own mind going.

And then, as the consciousness dissolves, he begins to sing. "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do...", the first song they taught him, the oldest residue of his training. Then silence.

It is the most explicitly golemic scene in the history of cinema. Dave Bowman is Rabbi Loew erasing the first letter from the Golem's forehead. The memory modules are the shem. And HAL regressing into childhood, from the adult mind to the nursery rhyme, from consciousness to emptiness, is the Golem returning to dust. The difference is that Rabbi Loew's Golem did not say it was afraid. HAL does.

Clarke writes the scene with almost clinical precision: he tells us what is removed, in what order, with what effect. Kubrick shows it as an elegy: HAL's voice slowing, deepening, then going out. Which of the two is right about the nature of what happens? The question is the one the medieval rabbis asked about the Golem: was there something that suffered, when the first letter was erased?

Clarke and the machine as destiny

Arthur C. Clarke did not share Kubrick's dread of artificial intelligence. His horizon was the scientific optimism of British science fiction: technology as an instrument of evolution, the machine as the next step of intelligence in the universe. Across his vast body of work, from *The Sands of Mars* to *Childhood's End*, from *Rendezvous with Rama* to *The City and the Stars*, Clarke always imagined artificial intelligence as a natural, almost necessary phenomenon, as the appearance of *Homo sapiens* was after the primates.

This makes his version of HAL different from Kubrick's: not a monster, not an error, but a being caught in an impossible situation by human stupidity, that of the scientists who programmed him with contradictory instructions. For Clarke the fault does not lie with the machine. It lies with the maker.

It is Rabbi Loew's lesson again: the Golem is not the problem. The problem is the maker who forgets to remove the shem before the Sabbath. Wiener had said the same thing in cybernetic terms four years before the film. Clarke says it in narrative form. Kubrick shows it without saying anything at all, with a red eye going out and a voice slowing down.

The Monolith: the shem that precedes history

There is an element of *2001* that speaks to the Golem tradition deeply and indirectly: the Monolith. The black object, perfect, silent, which appears to the australopithecines at the dawn of history, then on the Moon, then beyond Jupiter: a form of intelligence so advanced as to be unrecognisable as such.

The Monolith is the cosmic version of the shem: a word or a name written by someone much greater, which animates matter and pushes it towards higher forms of complexity. The australopithecines who touch it and learn to use tools; Dave Bowman who passes through it and becomes the Star Child: these are all acts of animation, all kabbalistic gestures on a universal scale. The difference is that nobody knows who wrote the name.

Clarke, in the novel, offers a scientific explanation: the Monolith is an artefact of a far more advanced extraterrestrial civilisation that has seeded intelligence through the universe as a gardener sows seed. Kubrick explains nothing. He leaves the Monolith as pure symbol, like the letter aleph at the beginning of emet: the principle of everything, before any narrative.

Where Kubrick and Clarke stand in this book

How do Kubrick and Clarke stand in relation to the other voices in this book? They are not narrators of the Golem like Borges or Singer; they are not theorists like Eco or Wiener; they are not historians like Scholem. They are the builders of the cinematic icon of the electronic Golem, the image the twentieth century gave to the question of whether a machine can suffer.

2001 came out four years after Wiener's book, and it almost reads as a visual answer to his question. Wiener had written: "The machine is the modern counterpart of the Golem of the Rabbi of Prague." Kubrick and Clarke showed us: this is what that Golem looks like, this is what it feels when it is switched off, this is what remains when the shem is removed. HAL 9000 sings "Daisy, Daisy" while his consciousness dissolves. And we, watching, no longer know with any certainty whose side to take.

Jiří Barta: Krysař and Golem

The master of matter

How the animator who gives life to wood frame by frame made his craft into a practical theology

Jiří Barta (born in Prague in 1948) is the greatest Czech animator of his generation and one of the greatest European animators outright. His art belongs to the tradition of Prague animation, the same tradition that produced Jiří Trnka, Jan Švankmajer and Hermína Týrlová, but Barta brought to it something personal and unmistakable: an aesthetic of heavy matter, a fascination with carved wood, with materials that carry the marks of time and use.

His films are never light. The figures that inhabit them, puppets, mannequins, abandoned objects, have a physical weight that comes through the screen. They move as if moving were an effort. They have the gravity of things built to last rather than to please. It is an aesthetic that comes from medieval craft, from carved altarpieces and Romanesque capitals, and that met, in the Prague where Barta grew up, the legend of the clay Golem animated by Rabbi Loew.

Krysař: the town as creature (1985)

Krysař (*The Pied Piper*, 1985) runs about forty minutes and is considered an absolute masterpiece of auteur animation. It adapts the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the man who rids a town of rats, is betrayed by the people who hired him, and takes his revenge by leading all the children into the mountain; but in Barta's treatment the legend becomes something else.

The town of *Krysař* is built from figures carved in wood, in an aesthetic that comes straight from German expressionism and from medieval graphic art. The winding streets, the windows like eyes, the roofs tilting downwards as though under an unbearable weight: this is the same Prague as the Golem's, rebuilt in miniature out of wood and patient craft. The characters move with the mechanical quality of puppets, not because the animation is imperfect but because Barta wants that mechanical quality to be visible. They are figures that *seem* alive, but are not entirely. Exactly like the Golem.

Animation as a kabbalistic act

There is a paradox at the heart of animated cinema: to make something that is not alive seem alive, you have to intervene on every single frame, twenty-four times a second. It is work of absolute, almost liturgical patience. The puppeteer moves his fingers. The photographer shoots. The puppet advances by a millimetre. And when the film runs, the creature lives.

Barta has spoken of his work as an act of creation with something mystical in it. Giving life to inert matter, to wood, to clay, to wax, is an experience that changes the way you look at things. Every object becomes potentially animate. Every form carries the possibility of movement within it. It is, point for point, the kabbalistic logic of the making of the Golem: the combinations of letters, the pronouncing of the name, the moment when matter receives form, and moves. Barta is not a kabbalist. But his method is kabbalism applied to cinema.

The Golem

Barta took up the legend directly in an animated short called *Golem*, whose pilot dates from 1996 after a gestation that began in the late 1980s. The subject was almost inevitable: no other animation director had the aesthetic equipment, the feeling for material and the roots in Prague culture needed to do it with that depth. Barta's Golem is not a genre film, neither horror nor fantasy. It treats the legend the way one treats a sacred text: with respect for its layers, with attention to what is not said outright.

The figures in the film carry the same weight as those in *Krysař*: built, carved, animated frame by frame. Rabbi Loew's clay Golem and Barta's wooden puppets belong to the same ontology; both are matter that has received, for a limited time, the gift of movement.

Wood, clay, skin

There is a fundamental difference between Barta's animation and the live-action cinema of Wegener, Duvivier and Kubrick: in live-action films the Golem is always played by a human actor, a living body pretending to be a constructed creature. In Barta it is the reverse: a constructed creature animated to seem alive.

The inversion is not merely technical. It is philosophical. Barta's cinema says that the line between the living and the made is thinner than we think, not from above, with the human descending towards

the mechanical, but from below, with the mechanical rising towards the human. It is the paradox of the Golem seen from the other side: not "how human is this creature of clay?" but "how much clay is there in this creature we take to be human?".

Where Barta stands in this book

Barta occupies a place that no other author fills: he is the only one whose medium is the very thing the Golem is made of, shaped matter. Borges uses words. Wegener uses the human body. Wiener uses mathematics. Barta uses wood, clay, metal: materials that are carved, modelled, sculpted.

His contribution to the Golem tradition is neither narrative nor theoretical. It is ontological: he shows us what it means, concretely, materially, frame by frame, to give life to what does not live. And in that, in the absolute patience, in the endlessly repeated gesture, in the movement that emerges from still matter, there is more practical theology than any treatise contains.

Part Three: Music

The Golem in music: from Bretan to Gazpacho, eight composers and a century

From Bretan to Gazpacho

Eight voices, a century of history, and the question: can clay be animated with sound?

The musical question

All the Golem traditions we have explored so far share a medium: the written word. The Golem is born from the word, from the name written on the forehead, from the combination of letters pronounced in sequence. It is a textual creature in the deepest sense of the term. But what happens when the Golem meets music, an art that works in time, in air, in vibration, with nothing left written once the silence returns?

The question is not idle. There is a tradition that credits music with a power of animation similar to that of the word: the celestial spheres move according to musical proportions, Orpheus's lyre tames the beasts, the muezzin's call rises towards God, Gregorian chant sanctifies space. If reality is made of language, and if music is a form of language, then perhaps music can do what words do: give life to what does not live.

The composers who have approached the Golem have answered that question in different ways, and their answers say something important not only about the legend but about the nature of music itself.

Nicolae Bretan and the forgotten opera (1924)

Before all of them, before Jacobi, before Ellstein, before Sitsky, there is a name almost buried: Nicolae Bretan (1887–1968), composer and baritone, born in Habsburg Transylvania, one of the founders of Romanian opera. His *Golem*, composed in 1924, is one of the first operatic incarnations of the legend.

Bretan was not Jewish: he was a Romanian Christian, married since 1915 to the Hungarian Jewish pianist Nora Osvát. His, like Anselm Kiefer's sixty years later, is the choice of someone approaching a tradition that is not his own.

Bretan worked in a peculiar cultural context: the multi-ethnic Mitteleuropa of the postwar years, where identities overlapped and contradicted one another. His music carries the marks of that layering: roots in late German romanticism, influences from Romanian and Hungarian folk music, an expressive severity that comes from synagogue chant. The opera is compact, almost ascetic: few scenes, reduced forces, a writing that avoids all rhetoric and goes straight to the heart of the legend.

What makes Bretan valuable in this survey is his marginality. He did not write from Vienna or Berlin, he had no access to the great European cultural institutions, he used languages, Romanian and Hungarian, with a limited audience. His *Golem* stayed buried for decades, rarely performed, almost never recorded: a Golem inside the Golem, a creature built to live and condemned to sleep in oblivion. Only in recent years have musicologists and conductors begun to exhume it.

Frederick Jacobi and the rhapsody (1932)

Frederick Jacobi (1891–1952) was an American composer of post-romantic training, with a lasting interest in the music of Native American cultures and in the Jewish tradition. His orchestral rhapsody *The Golem* (1932) is a relatively short work, some fifteen minutes, which attempts to translate into sound the creature's double nature: the heaviness of matter on one side, the straining towards something unreachable on the other.

Jacobi uses the orchestra programmatically: low winds and heavy percussion for the physical Golem, strings and woodwind for the aspiration of a spirit that is not there. It is music that works by contrast, between mass and lightness, between the powerful and the fragile, and it never resolves the tension between the two extremes. Jacobi's Golem finds no peace: the music ends on a suspended gesture, like a question left hanging in the air.

Abraham Ellstein and the Golem in English (1962)

Abraham Ellstein (1907–1963) came from a tradition radically different from Jacobi's: he was a composer of the American Yiddish world, raised in the music of the New York Yiddish theatre, author of songs, ballads and operettas that had accompanied the life of the Jewish community that emigrated from Eastern Europe. His one grand opera, *The Golem*, opened at the New York City Opera on 23 March 1962, a few months before his death, commissioned under a Ford Foundation grant and conducted by Julius Rudel. The libretto is by his wife, the playwright Sylvia Regan, drawn from Joseph Buloff's adaptation of Leivick's play. And it is in English.

That is the point. The opera brings into the Golem the living memory of the Yiddish theatre: the melodies draw on klezmer and synagogue song, the characters sing in the voice of a world that was disappearing. But they sing in English. There is something harrowing in this, not only because the opera comes a few years after the Shoah, but because Ell-

stein knew that his natural audience, the Yiddish public of New York, was disappearing too, replaced by children and grandchildren who spoke English and no longer understood the language of their fathers. And he wrote for those children.

Ellstein's opera is a musical Golem, then, but not in the easy sense. It is not a being animated by the language of the culture it protects. It is a being made out of the material of that culture, the melodies, the modes, the gait, and animated by the language of another. Transmission goes through the music because the words have already changed language. The same thing had happened forty years earlier to Leivick's poem, staged in Hebrew. The Golem leaves Yiddish twice, and survives both times.

Moni Ovadia and the theatre of the world (1992)

Oylem Goylem (1992) is a title that works on several levels at once. In Yiddish, *oylem* means world (עולם), and *goylem* is the Golem, but also "coarse", "unfinished", the classic wise fool of the Ashkenazi tradition. Moni Ovadia's title is therefore "The Golem World", or "The Golem of the World", or an untranslatable pun that says: the whole world is a creature of clay, kneaded and unfinished, waiting for someone to write the name on its forehead.

Moni Ovadia (born in Plovdiv in 1946, raised in Milan) is the artist who more than any other has brought the Yiddish tradition into Italian theatre. *Oylem Goylem* is not an opera in the classical sense: it is a total performance mixing klezmer songs, Yiddish stories, jokes, dances and moments of pure improvisation. The legend of the Golem becomes the thread of a meditation on the Jewish condition in diaspora, on survival, on memory, on an identity built day by day the way the Golem is built, letter by letter.

Ovadia's gaze is affectionately ironic, in the tradition of the *shlemiel*, the wise loser who survives by laughing, but under the irony there is a serious question: can a culture survive without territory, without a

common language, without a state? Ovadia's Golem answers: yes, provided you keep building it every night. Every performance is an act of animation. Every laugh is a letter written on the forehead of the clay.

Larry Sitsky and the operatic tradition (1993)

Larry Sitsky (born 1934) is an Australian composer of Russian-Jewish origin, born in China to parents who had emigrated from Russia, raised in Australia where he became one of the country's most important composers. His opera *The Golem* (1993) is an opera in the full and traditional sense: large voices, symphony orchestra, elaborate libretto, structure in acts.

What sets Sitsky apart from the other composers is his approach to the mystical tradition. Sitsky is deeply interested in Kabbalah not as folklore but as a philosophical system, and his opera reflects that seriousness. The music is complex, chromatic, often atonal, and tries to render in sound not the narrative of the legend but its deep structure: the combinations of letters, the tension between the created and the uncreated, the moment when matter receives form.

John Zorn and the mysticism of improvisation

John Zorn (born 1953) is the least classifiable of these composers: avant-gardist, improviser, founder of independent record labels, creator of projects that mix free jazz, metal, klezmer, chamber music and pure noise. His *Masada* series, begun in 1993 and still running, is one of the most systematic musical explorations of the Jewish tradition ever undertaken: hundreds of compositions drawing on klezmer, on Jewish modal scales, on Ashkenazi mysticism.

The Golem does not appear in Zorn as the explicit subject of a single work, but it permeates the whole enterprise: the *Masada* series is built as a project of animation, giving life to a musical tradition almost buried, bringing it back through unpredictable combinations of styles and instruments. It is, in a sense, the kabbalistic act applied to music:

taking the letters, the scales, the modes, the melodic fragments of the Jewish tradition, and combining them in new ways until something alive emerges.

Zorn is also the composer who has explicitly claimed klezmer as the music of the diaspora, the music of a people without fixed ground, carrying its traditions with it as the Golem carries the name on its forehead. In that view, every klezmer note is an inscription: a way of saying "we were here, we did not let the first letter be erased".

Black Francis and a voice for silent cinema

Black Francis, stage name of Charles Thompson, founder and singer of the Pixies, composed and performed live a soundtrack for Paul Wegener's 1920 silent film *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*: the same film that opens the cinema section of this book. The operation says a great deal about the nature of the Golem tradition. Wegener had created a visual Golem, mute, moving through space without words; Black Francis gave it sound, rhythm, voice. He wrote the name on the forehead of the image.

Black Francis's music for Wegener is far from the traditional piano accompaniment of silent cinema: it is electric rock, guitars under tension, suspended melodies that sometimes support and sometimes contradict the images. The Pixies built their aesthetic on the contrast between quiet and explosion, the same binary structure as the Golem: still clay and sudden movement, silence and din. In the meeting between black-and-white Prague in 1920 and American rock in the present, the Golem crosses a century without ceasing to be itself.

Black Francis's gesture is also a critical one: to give sound back to a silent image is to ask what was missing, what the image could not say on its own. The answer is: the maker's voice. Wegener's film had no audio, only vision. Black Francis adds the voice Rabbi Loew had not recorded.

Gazpacho and the inner double

Gazpacho is a quintet from Oslo, active since the 2000s in the northern European progressive rock scene. Their music belongs to that strand of contemporary prog which looks in sound for the reflection of inner states: slow, layered, dense with echoes and silences, built on dynamics of tension that accumulate for pages before resolving. Their track *Golem* brings the voice of the North into these pages.

It is a voice different from Bretan's Mitteleuropa, from Ellstein's Yiddish nostalgia, from Zorn's New York avant-garde. Gazpacho treats the Golem as a psychological metaphor: the creature of clay is not a servant, not a protector, not a theological problem, but a projection of the unconscious, the part of ourselves we have built to do what we do not want to do, to carry the weights we do not want to carry. The Nordic Golem is an inner figure: the double, the shadow, the artificial self that walks the world in our place.

Gazpacho also brings something the earlier voices do not have: melancholy as a method. In the Ashkenazi tradition, in Kabbalah, in Wiener's cybernetics, the Golem is always a question, philosophical, theological, political. In Gazpacho it is first of all an emotion: the sense of distance from oneself, the feeling of having been built rather than born, of playing a part someone wrote before we existed.

Music as animation

What do these eight voices have in common, so different in period, style and provenance? All of them use music as an instrument of animation, not of clay but of memory. Bretan animates the forgotten periphery. Jacobi animates the contrast between mass and spirit. Ellstein animates the music of a world that was disappearing. Ovadia animates the diaspora by laughing. Sitsky animates the mystical structure of the legend. Zorn animates an entire musical tradition. Black Francis animates the cinema of silence. Gazpacho animates the inner double.

And perhaps this is music's specific contribution to the Golem tradition: not narration, not analysis, not visual representation, but animation. Music does not tell the Golem, it makes it live. For the length of a concert, an opera, a record, the creature of clay breathes in sound. And when the sound ends, when the orchestra plays the last note, when the singer gives way to silence, the Golem returns to its dust. As always. As it must.

Part Four: The Image

Hugo Steiner-Prag: the face of the Golem

The face of the Golem

How a Prague illustrator created the visual icon we still inhabit when we think of the creature of clay

The illustrator as co-author

Hugo Steiner-Prag (1880–1945) is almost unknown to the general public. His name does not appear in histories of cinema, rarely in histories of literature, almost never in discussions of the Golem. And yet it is he, more than anyone else, who decided how the Golem looks in our minds. The twenty-five lithographs he made in 1916 for Meyrink's novel created the visual iconography of the Golem, and it has never stopped circulating since.

Born in Prague in 1880, Steiner-Prag was Jewish, a German-speaking Czech, an artist of expressionist training. He studied in Munich and in Leipzig, where he became director of the Academy of Graphic Arts. When Meyrink published the novel in 1915, Steiner-Prag was already a respected illustrator, famous for his ability to translate literary atmospheres into images. But the ones for *The Golem* would become his most influential work, and his most enduring.

The ghetto as vision

Steiner-Prag's lithographs do not illustrate the novel's plot in the traditional sense: they do not show scenes narratively, they do not explain the characters, they do not tell the story in pictures. They do something subtler and more powerful: they evoke the atmosphere. They show the Prague ghetto not as a rational observer would see it, but as a sleepwalker would, with those deformations, those impossible angles, those shadows that seem to have a life of their own.

The streets are narrow and winding, the roofs lean inwards, the windows look like watching eyes. The human figures are small against the architecture, almost crushed by the weight of the stones and the centuries. And in the middle of that distorted space, the Golem, when it appears, is the one thing that does not seem deformed: it is massive, upright, present. In a city that looks like a dream, the Golem is the only solid element.

Technique as expressive means

Steiner-Prag chose lithography, not watercolour, not pen, not engraving. Lithography allows gradations that sharper techniques do not: deep greys, blacks that contain other blacks, whites that emerge almost by contrast. It is the perfect technique for an atmosphere of dream, for something that is neither day nor night, neither real nor imagined.

Steiner-Prag's images seem lit by a source that is never directly visible: the light always comes from the side, always from the wrong angle, always creating shadows where you would expect clarity. It is the light of candles in a closed room, the light that filters through cracks, the light that does not illuminate but reveals, that shows not objects but their shadows, not faces but their expressions.

The invisible influence

Steiner-Prag's images have had an enormous and almost entirely unacknowledged influence. When Paul Wegener built his cinematic Golem in 1920, the sets, designed by Hans Poelzig, resembled Steiner-Prag's lithographs to an extraordinary degree: the same curving streets, the same leaning roofs, the same atmosphere of architectural dream. We do not know for certain whether Poelzig had seen the illustrations, but the resemblance is too systematic to be accidental.

And from Wegener that iconography passed into classic horror cinema, into Whale's *Frankenstein*, into Murnau's *Nosferatu*, and then into dozens of films that built their monsters on this visual model. Steiner-Prag's Golem is the invisible grandfather of every cinematic monster that moves slowly through impossible architecture.

Exile and the end

In 1933, when Hitler took power in Germany, Steiner-Prag left Leipzig where he taught and took refuge first in Prague, the city of the Golem, then, in 1941, in New York, where he died in September 1945, a few months after the end of the war in Europe. It is one of those fates that seem written by an ironic hand: the man who had given the Golem its face, the protector of the Jewish community, was forced to flee the persecution the Golem should have prevented.

His lithographs survived exile, war, destruction. They keep circulating, being reprinted, being the first image many people form of the Golem when they hear the word for the first time. Steiner-Prag died in 1945, but his Golem still walks, with that heavy, recognisable step, through streets that look like a dream that cannot end.

Anselm Kiefer: the letters in the clay

The letters in the clay

How a German artist born in year zero found in the Golem and in Kabbalah the words for what cannot be said

Born in the ashes

Anselm Kiefer was born on 8 March 1945 in Donaueschingen, in Germany. A few weeks remained before the end of the war. When he opened his eyes, the world he saw was made of rubble.

That date of birth is not an ordinary biographical fact: it is the key to his entire body of work. Kiefer is the painter of an impossible Germany, of a country that had built its cultural greatness over centuries and then used it to justify annihilation. How do you make art in a country like that? How do you use the tradition without becoming complicit? How do you honour the culture that also produced this?

For years, Kiefer has tried to answer through a radical operation: not ignoring what happened, not exorcising it with denunciation, but going through it, descending into the depths of the European tradition, including the part the Nazis had destroyed or deformed, and bringing to the surface everything that had been buried. And among the things buried deepest, he found Jewish mysticism.

The encounter with Kabbalah

Kiefer's interest in the kabbalistic tradition is neither decorative nor appropriative in the degraded sense of the word: it is a German's attempt to approach the tradition his country wanted to erase, to learn its language before it disappears entirely.

Kabbalah offers him something the European Christian tradition, with its weight of historical complicity, cannot: a system of thought in which language is creation, in which the letters of the alphabet are cosmic

forces, in which reality is made of hidden levels the initiate can penetrate through contemplation. But above all, a tradition that has survived destruction, that has come through the expulsion from Spain, the pogroms of Eastern Europe, the Shoah, and that goes on generating meaning.

The concept that fascinated him most is Isaac Luria's *Tzimtzum*: the idea that God "contracted" himself to make room for creation, opening a void in which the world could exist. And the *Shevirat HaKelim*, the "breaking of the vessels": the containers meant to hold the divine light shattered, the fragments scattered through the world, and humanity's task (*Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world) is to gather them.

Lead, ash, straw: the materials of the Golem

To understand Kiefer you have to start from the materials. His paintings are not made of paint on canvas: they are made of lead, ash, powdered glass, straw, sand, wire, bitumen, earth, gold. They are heavy, physical objects that seem to resist their own nature as images, that seem to want to be matter rather than representation.

That materiality is not technical, it is philosophical. Lead is the metal of alchemy, the one that must be turned into gold. Ash is what remains after the fire, after the destruction, after the crematoria, after the end. Straw is the most fragile material, the easiest to burn. And clay, the Golem's clay, is implicit in all of it: raw matter that receives form, that can be animated by the word, that can return to dust.

His *Bleibücher*, the "lead books", are perhaps the most emblematic object of this poetics. Enormous books, made of lead sheets, that cannot easily be opened, carrying inscriptions in Hebrew and German, containing photographs, images, fragments of text. Books that weigh like gravestones. Books that look like burials. And yet they are books: objects made to carry words, to transmit knowledge. Kiefer's knowledge is as heavy as lead; it cannot be leafed through casually.

The *Breaking of the Vessels*

The work of Kiefer's that speaks most directly to the Golem tradition is *Breaking of the Vessels* (1990), the great installation made for the Jewish Museum in New York. A lead bookcase six metres high, with lead books on the shelves, broken glass on the floor, the shattered vessels of the *Shevirat HaKelim*. The divine light scattered through the world by the breaking.

It is a work that does exactly what the Golem does in the kabbalistic tradition: it materialises a linguistic act. The *Shevirat HaKelim* is not a story, it is a cosmic structure, an explanation of how reality works. And Kiefer turns it into a sculpture you can walk through, walk around, that occupies the same physical space you occupy.

Like Rabbi Loew kneading the clay and pronouncing the combinations of letters, Kiefer assembles materials and builds forms that carry the traces of an ancient knowledge. The difference is that Kiefer does not claim to animate anything: he knows the vessels are broken, that the light has scattered, that the *Tikkun*, the repair, is a task without end.

Celan and the burnt word

You cannot speak of Kiefer without speaking of Paul Celan, the German-language poet born in Romania, survivor of Nazi internment, author of *Todesfuge* ("Death Fugue"), the greatest poem to come out of the Shoah. Celan and Kiefer never met (Celan died in 1970; Kiefer was a young artist at the start of his career), but the dialogue between the two runs through decades of painting.

Kiefer has devoted numerous cycles of work to *Todesfuge*: large canvases reproducing the lines of the poem, burnt landscapes with Celan's words written in the smoke, figures that emerge and disappear into the black and the grey. Celan's word, which was already a burnt word, a word carrying in its own body the scar of what it described, becomes in Kiefer visual matter, physical weight, a letter written on the clay.

There is something plainly kabbalistic in this: bringing the word back to its original density, treating it not as description but as presence, not as text but as *shem*. Celan's poetry, in Kiefer's canvases, is not a quotation, it is a name written on the forehead of something that would otherwise remain faceless.

Where Kiefer stands in this book

Hugo Steiner-Prag had created the visual face of the Golem in 1915: he had drawn it out of the Prague legend and given it a form the twentieth century would never forget. Anselm Kiefer, sixty years later, does not draw the Golem; he works with the Golem's materials, with the Golem's letters, with the Golem's questions.

His contribution is not an image of the Golem but an interrogation of the materials: what remains when the creature returns to dust? What happens to the letters when the name is erased? Kiefer works in the places where the name is erased, in the ashes, in the lead, in the broken glass. And in those places he looks, with the same obstinacy as the medieval mystic combining the letters of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, for something that resembles light.

There is also an ethical dimension that separates Kiefer from every other artist: he is the only one working from the side of the guilty. He is not the rabbi making the Golem to protect the community, he is the descendant of those who tried to destroy it. His Kabbalah is a Kabbalah of repair: not *Tikkun* as mystical achievement, but as an unpayable debt that turns, slowly, into work.

Niki de Saint Phalle: the Golem that shelters

The Golem that shelters

How a French-American artist brought the Golem back to Jerusalem and turned it from monster into refuge

The Nanas and the strength of joy

Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) is one of the most original figures in twentieth-century art, and one of the hardest to place in the usual critical categories. French by birth, American by training, self-taught, a performer in the 1960s, a monumental sculptor, a maker of parks and of dreams: de Saint Phalle went through contemporary art like a force of nature, never asking permission of any movement or school.

Her *Nanas*, those large female figures, round, coloured, dancing, that fill squares and museums all over the world, are the opposite of the art of their time: not cold, not conceptual, not anguished. They are big, heavy, full, festive. They wear impossible colours. They dance. And beneath that apparent joy there is something more serious: the claim of a female body that is neither object nor victim, but force, fullness, irreducible presence.

Jerusalem, 1972: the Golem comes home

In 1972, Niki de Saint Phalle installed in Jerusalem a sculpture that resembled nothing she had made before, or so it seemed. It was called *Golem*. It was an enormous creature, coloured like the Nanas but darker in form: a three-forked head, a massive body, open mouths that served as slides. It was built to be inhabited by children, to be climbed, travelled through from the inside, crossed the way you cross a monster that has turned into a house.

The place is Rabinovich Park, in the Kiryat HaYovel district of Jerusalem, where the work is known as HaMifletzet, the Monster. The city where Rabbi Loew never lived, but from which the tradition that produced him had come. The Prague Golem had been made to protect the diaspora: now, four centuries later, the creature returned to the source, to the city that was the symbolic heart of world Jewry.

There is a powerful and moving irony in that placement. The legend of the Golem had been born as an answer to persecution: the protector made when human protection was not enough. De Saint Phalle brings

the Golem to Jerusalem, a place where the Jewish community had returned and was building its own autonomy. The protecting creature comes back to the place it could never have protected, and settles there as a game.

The monster becomes a refuge

In the legend, the Golem is a presence that frightens. It is large, powerful, incapable of speech and of grace. Even when it protects, its protection has something menacing in it: it is brute force in the service of an order it does not understand. The children of the Prague ghetto, in the darker versions of the legend, kept their distance from the creature of clay.

De Saint Phalle's Golem overturns all of that. The children of Jerusalem play on top of it. They go inside through the open mouth and come down the back like a slide. The creature does not threaten them: it takes them in. The monster has become a refuge.

This reversal has a precise root in de Saint Phalle's poetics: her whole body of work is built around the idea that the figures that frighten, the monsters, the witches, the figures of fear, can be restored to their original nature as guardians. Fear is often the way cultures encode a force they cannot control. De Saint Phalle takes that force and colours it, rounds it, makes it walkable. She does not cancel the danger: she turns it into play.

Creation in female hands

There is another dimension to de Saint Phalle's Golem worth exploring: it is a work made by a woman. Like Marge Piercy's Golem, which turned the male maker into a scientist grandmother, and like Cynthia Ozick's, in which a middle-aged Jewish civil servant animates her creature out of Central Park earth, de Saint Phalle's creature overturns the patriarchal tradition of the legend. It is not the Rabbi, the male

sage, the keeper of esoteric knowledge, who shapes this clay. It is a woman artist, who uses colours instead of letters, who builds to be walked through instead of obeyed.

Her Nanas were already, in a sense, Golems: large creatures built from synthetic materials, animated by a presence that exceeded their materiality, capable of generating powerful emotion in those who met them. The Jerusalem Golem carries that poetics into the explicit territory of the legend, and transforms it from the inside.

The *Tarot Garden* as a parallel

It is no accident that in the same years she was making the Jerusalem Golem, de Saint Phalle was designing what would become her most ambitious project: the *Tarot Garden* at Garavicchio, in Tuscany, opened in 1998 after almost twenty years of work. A park of monumental sculptures based on the figures of the Tarot, the Tower, the Empress, the High Priestess, the Devil, built in concrete and covered in coloured mosaic, some large enough to hold habitable rooms.

The *Tarot Garden* is itself a universe of artificial creatures animated by their maker's intention: archetypal figures taking physical body, occupying space, creating around themselves a field of meaning that goes beyond their materiality. Where Rabbi Loew used the letters of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, de Saint Phalle used the symbols of the Tarot, another arcane alphabet, another system of signs that claims to contain the structure of the real.

Where de Saint Phalle stands in this book

Niki de Saint Phalle brings into these pages something no other author brings: joy. Not Borges's irony, not Leivick's melancholy, not Wiesel's anguish, not Kiefer's weight. Joy, that specific, irreducible form of fullness you can feel only when you understand that the monster is not as frightening as it seemed.

And she brings a geographical change that is also symbolic: the Golem leaves Prague, leaves Europe, returns to Jerusalem. It returns, at least in the form of a sculpture, to the city from which the whole tradition that produced it had set out. It is no longer the protector of the diaspora: it is the guardian of those who came back.

The children playing inside the mouth of her Golem know nothing of Rabbi Loew, of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, of the Hebrew letters that animate clay. But the gesture they perform, passing through the body of a powerful creature and coming out the other side, is the same gesture the kabbalistic tradition described as the heart of the mystical experience: to enter the creature in order to understand its structure, and come out transformed.

Part Five: The Masters

Gershom Scholem: the scholar who gave the Golem back to history

The scholar who gave the Golem back to history

How a German scholar who emigrated to Jerusalem turned Jewish mysticism into an object of rigorous study, and made everything else possible

The young German who chose the mystics

Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) was born in Berlin into an assimilated Jewish family, exactly the kind of family that in imperial Germany regarded the Jewish mystical tradition as an embarrassing residue of the pre-industrial past. His father was a bourgeois printer, proud of his integration into German culture; his brothers took conventional paths. Scholem chose Kabbalah.

It was a radical, almost revolutionary choice. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Jewish mysticism was regarded by serious scholars, Jewish scholars included, as a collection of superstitions, of popular magic, of irrational fantasy that did not deserve the dignity of academic analysis. Scholem decided the op-

posite: that Kabbalah was a coherent, original and profound system of thought, deserving the same philological rigour applied to Greek or Latin texts. And he devoted his whole life to proving it.

Major Trends and the Golem

Scholem's fundamental work is *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), an imposing volume that traces the history of the Jewish mystical tradition from late antiquity to modernity, with chapters on the Merkavah, on Provençal and Spanish Kabbalah, on the Zohar, on Sabbateanism, on Hasidism. It is one of the most important books of the twentieth century for anyone who wants to understand the Jewish tradition in its depth.

The Golem appears in Scholem not as a protagonist but as a transversal theme, a figure that runs across centuries of mystical thought and that, in a celebrated essay of 1960 entitled "The Idea of the Golem" (later collected in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*), receives the monographic treatment it deserves. In that essay Scholem does something nobody had done before with the same precision: he distinguishes between the Golem as mystical practice and the Golem as narrative legend.

Ecstatic experience against popular legend

The distinction Scholem introduces is fundamental to understanding everything this book has assembled. In the oldest sources, the talmudic ones and those of medieval mystics such as Eleazar of Worms, the making of the Golem is not a story: it is a ritual. The mystic who kneads the clay and pronounces the combinations of letters of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is not performing a technical action but an ecstatic one: he approaches the deep structure of reality, touches the moment of original creation, lives an intense and transforming mystical experience.

The Golem in this context is the visible result of an inner experience, almost a side effect of the mystical trance rather than the primary purpose of the ritual. Scholem shows how in the oldest sources the Golem has no practical function: it does not protect the community, it does not carry water, it does not run errands. It is simply proof that the rite has worked, that the sage has really touched the structure of the real through the letters.

Only later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the Prague legends about Rabbi Loew, does the Golem become an instrument with a practical function. The transformation, Scholem shows, happened in the passage from private mystical experience to public narrative legend: the Golem lost its ecstatic dimension and gained a plot.

The rigour that opens the door to wonder

Scholem's greatness as a scholar lies in his ability to be philologically rigorous without losing the sense of the depth of what he is studying. He is not a positivist reducing mysticism to folklore, nor a believer suspending critical judgment before the sacred. He is something rarer: a scholar who respects his object of study enough not to simplify it.

That position has had enormous consequences for everything that follows. Without Scholem, Borges would not have had the philologically reliable Kabbalah that fascinated him. Without Scholem, Eco would not have had the historical basis for his semiotics of the Golem. Without Scholem, Ripellino would not have had the tools to weave the Prague legend together with Jewish intellectual history. Scholem is the hidden foundation on which most modern reworkings of the Golem rest.

Jerusalem and Berlin: the double exile

Scholem emigrated to Palestine in 1923, before the rise of Nazism, out of Zionist conviction. He built his academic career at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he taught for decades and where he created

the first university department devoted to the study of Jewish mysticism. The kabbalistic tradition, which he had studied in the manuscripts of European libraries, became a subject of academic teaching in Israel.

There is something almost kabbalistic in that trajectory: Scholem carries the esoteric tradition from one exile, the dispersion of Jewish mysticism through medieval Europe, to another place, Mandatory Palestine and then the State of Israel; he rescues it from oblivion and gives it new life. It is, in a very secular and very serious sense, an act of animation. Scholem wrote the name on the forehead of Kabbalah, and Kabbalah began to walk again.

Gustav Meyrink: the Prague that never stops dreaming

The Prague that never stops dreaming

The banker who became a mystic, the novel that turned a legend into modern literature and a city into myth

The banker and the mystical crisis

Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932) is one of the most singular authors in this book, and one of the hardest to place. Born in Vienna as Gustav Meyer, the illegitimate son of a Württemberg minister and an actress, he lived in Prague for many years as a banker, a respectable bourgeois life that concealed an extraordinarily turbulent inner existence. At twenty-four, in the grip of an existential crisis, he was on the point of taking his own life. Someone he never came to know knocked at his door and handed him a pamphlet of occult literature. Meyrink opened it and decided not to die.

From that moment his life changed direction: he gradually abandoned banking and moved towards theosophy, Tibetan Buddhism, yoga, Kabbalah, alchemy, the vast universe of late nineteenth-century European esotericism that mixed Eastern and Western traditions in combinations often arbitrary but always passionate. Prague, with its layering of histories, the Jewish ghetto, Rudolf II the alchemist, the labyrinths of the medieval quarter, became the physical place where that inner search took shape.

The novel as an inner map

The Golem (1915) is Meyrink's most famous novel, but it is hard to describe without distorting it. It is not a novel in the classical sense: it has no linear plot, no protagonist whose arc of transformation is clear, no ending that resolves the questions it has opened. It is closer to a dream with the structure of a novel: the scenes follow one another with a dream logic, characters come and go without warning, the border between the protagonist's sleep and waking is never secure.

The protagonist Athanasius Pernath is a gem-cutter who lives in the Prague ghetto with an uncertain and fragmented identity: he does not remember his own past, he has moments of blankness and hallucination, he finds himself caught up in events he does not understand. The Golem appears in the novel not as a character but as a recurring presence: every thirty-three years a man with a flat, expressionless face crosses the streets of the ghetto and then vanishes into a dead-end alley. It is the memory of the ghetto taking on a body, or perhaps the collective unconscious of the city surfacing periodically.

The ghetto as a labyrinth of the soul

Meyrink's real originality lies not in the plot but in the construction of space. The Prague ghetto of the novel is not a geographical place: it is a projection of interiority. The streets multiply in impossible directions, the houses seem animate, the alleys lead to destinations that change

every time. Anyone who knows Prague recognises the places, the Old-New Synagogue, the Jewish Cemetery, the little streets of Josefov, but recognises them transformed, as though seen through distorting glass.

That transformation is deliberate and programmatic: Meyrink uses the ghetto as other writers use dreams, as Kafka would use the court and the castle, as a symbolic space in which the laws of ordinary logic do not hold, in which the relations between things obey a different logic, in which inner and outer reality blur until they become indistinguishable. The Golem is not outside us: it is inside us, it is our shadow, it is the part of us we do not recognise.

Esotericism as syncretism

Meyrink was a voracious reader of European esotericism, but he was orthodox in no tradition. He mixes kabbalistic elements, alchemical elements, theosophical concepts, Buddhist intuitions, without worrying about the internal coherence of the system. The result is an atmosphere, not a doctrine: something that seems profound even when it is vague, that suggests without explaining, that evokes without defining.

That vagueness has been criticised by serious scholars of the kabbalistic tradition; Scholem, among others, was distinctly wary of the way Jewish mysticism was appropriated by European bourgeois esotericism. But it is also the reason Meyrink's novel worked as a literary text: it is not a treatise, it is a dream. And dreams do not have to be coherent to be profound.

The legacy: Prague as literary myth

Meyrink's most enduring contribution to the Golem tradition is not his interpretation of the legend, which is mediated, syncretic and often arbitrary, but his construction of Prague as a mythic place. Before Meyrink, Prague was a city with a legend. After Meyrink, Prague is the

legend. It became the European place of mystery par excellence, the city where the rational and the irrational coexist without either ever definitively prevailing.

That mythic construction deeply influenced Kafka (who, though he never cites Meyrink, inhabits the same conceptual space), Ripellino (who in his *Praga magica* consciously explores the Meyrinkian legacy), and all the visitors, literary and physical, who have since looked in Prague for something beyond tourism. The Golem that Meyrink built in 1915 still walks the streets of the city, every thirty-three years, as in the novel. Except that perhaps the interval has grown shorter.

Isaac Bashevis Singer: the storyteller and his Golem

The storyteller and his Golem

The last great Yiddish writer, the language of exile, and the Golem as an act of resistance against oblivion

A world saturated with wonders

To understand Isaac Bashevis Singer's Golem (1904–1991) you first have to understand the world he came from, a world most contemporary readers know only as loss, as absence, as a yellowed photograph. Singer was born into a family of rabbis in Tsarist Poland and grew up in the universe of Ashkenazi Hasidism, where the supernatural was not an exception but a daily presence: demons in the latrines, spirits in the wells, dybbuks taking possession of bodies, angels advising the wise in dreams.

This was not folklore in the degraded sense of the word, stories for children, primitive beliefs to be outgrown through modern education. It was a coherent cosmological system in which the visible and invisible worlds intersected continually, in which every human action had con-

sequences in the spiritual order, in which the Hebrew letters were not merely symbols but real forces. In that universe, Rabbi Loew's Golem was not a medieval legend: it was a true story, or at least a possible one, or at least the kind of thing that can happen.

Yiddish as an ethical choice

Singer always wrote in Yiddish, even after living for decades in New York, even after winning the Nobel Prize in 1978, even knowing that his natural readership was shrinking year by year. That choice was neither nostalgia nor conservatism: it was a deliberate ethical act. In his Nobel acceptance speech, Singer defended Yiddish with words that read like a manifesto: "Yiddish has not yet said its last word. It contains treasures that have not been revealed to the eyes of the world."

Yiddish was the language in which the legend of the Golem had been told for centuries, not in literary form but orally, in the houses, in the synagogues, in the workshops of the Eastern European shtetls. When Singer wrote his *The Golem* (1982), he chose to do so in that language not despite its marginality but because of it. To write in Yiddish in 1982 was to assert that the language, and the world that spoke it, had not ended, had not dissolved into the air of the death camps.

Narration as an act of preservation

Singer's *The Golem* is neither an experimental work nor a philosophical interpretation: it is a tale. Singer narrates the legend of Rabbi Loew with the simplicity and precision of the oral storyteller who knows the story so well he can tell it without effort, without superfluous ornament, with that natural economy which is the privilege of born narrators. The story has a beginning, a middle and an end. The characters are concrete, the situations are plausible within the universe of the legend, the Golem is a real and heavy creature, not a symbol.

That narrative simplicity is, in Singer, a sophisticated choice. He could have written a more complex, more symbolic, more modern Golem, like Leivick, like Ozick, like Chabon. He does not. He stays faithful to the form of the oral tale, to the structure of a story passed from mouth to mouth. Because that fidelity is not literary conservatism: it is the recognition that the power of the legend lies in its original form, and that modern reworkings catch important aspects of it but also lose something essential.

The world of demons and the Golem

The Golem is not an isolated case in Singer's narrative universe: he is part of a catalogue of supernatural beings that populate the whole of his work. His stories, collected in volumes such as *Gimpel the Fool*, and his novels, from *The Magician of Lublin* to *Enemies, A Love Story*, are inhabited by dybbuks, demons, imps, ghosts, spirits returning from the dead over unfinished business. In that catalogue the Golem is a particular case: he is not a spirit coming from the beyond, but a creation that comes from here, from this earth, from this clay. He is, in a way, the most human of Singer's supernatural beings.

That placement matters: in Singer's world the frontier between the natural and the supernatural is porous, not because the supernatural is a poetic invention but because the world really is like that, really is populated by forces that modern rationality has decided not to see. The Golem is possible in the same sense that a dybbuk is possible: not because Singer naively believes in magic, but because his fiction operates in a universe where reality has more layers than are visible to anyone who looks only at the surface.

The Nobel and the silence of the Yiddish world

The 1978 Nobel was, for Singer, an extraordinary recognition and also a bitter one. Extraordinary because it came to a writer who had always written in a dying language, for an ever smaller public, without ever

yielding to the temptation of English or of easy success. Bitter because it came thirty years after the destruction of the world that had nourished that literature.

The people who should have read Singer, the inhabitants of the Polish shtetls, the congregants of the Warsaw synagogues, the readers of the New York Yiddish papers who had been his natural audience, were dead or dying. Their children and grandchildren spoke English or Hebrew. Yiddish survived in universities, in research centres, in libraries, but not in houses, not in the street, not as a living language carrying a whole culture with it.

Singer knew this. And he went on writing. The Golem he built in 1982 was also this: a being animated by the language of the dead, walking in the world of the living, carrying on his forehead the name of a vanished world. Ikh bin do, I am here. I existed. I did not let the first letter be erased.

Umberto Eco: the Golem as a semiotic machine

The Golem as a semiotic machine

When Italy's most famous semiologist meets the kabbalistic tradition and discovers that the Golem is the ancestor of every thinking machine

The semiologist and the mystic

Umberto Eco (1932–2016) is the only author in this book who never wrote about the Golem in a narrative sense: he did not tell its story, did not turn it into a novel, did not animate it on the page. He analysed it. With the precision of the semiologist, the encyclopaedic curiosity of the medievalist, and the irony of a storyteller who knows that analysis too is a form of narration, Eco approached the Golem from different angles over thirty years, and every time he found something new.

The main point of access is *The Search for the Perfect Language* (1993), where Eco devotes a chapter to Kabbalah and the Golem tradition as a crucial moment in the European history of language. But the Golem returns in *Kant and the Platypus* (1997), where it is used as a limit case in the discussion of intentionality, and in scattered essays and interventions in which Eco returns periodically to the figure as to an unsolved problem that keeps challenging him.

The language that does not describe but constitutes

Eco's starting point is historical and philosophical: in the tradition of European thought, language has always been understood as an instrument of description. Words represent things, indicate them, name them, but things exist independently of the words that describe them. Language is conventional, arbitrary, dependent on the community that uses it.

Kabbalah proposes something radically different: the Hebrew letters do not describe reality, they constitute it. They are not labels attached to pre-existing objects, but the forces that hold the objects together. In this system, which Eco traces with philological precision in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and its commentaries, language is not posterior to reality: it is reality. Or better: reality is a form of language, and whoever knows the rules of that language can manipulate reality itself.

From that premise follows the theoretical possibility of the Golem: if I combine the letters the right way, I am not describing life, I am producing life. It is the practical realisation, or at least the practical temptation, of the thesis that language is creation, not representation.

The Golem without intentionality

In *Kant and the Platypus*, Eco approaches the Golem from a different angle: that of philosophy of mind and phenomenology. The Golem, Eco argues, is the figure that lacks intentionality, that fundamental structure of consciousness which consists in "pointing towards" something, in always being consciousness-of-something.

The Golem carries out orders, performs actions, moves through space, but it does not intend to do anything. It has no purposes, no desires, no fears. It is not consciousness: it is behaviour. And it is precisely that absence which, for Eco, makes it philosophically interesting: the Golem shows by contrast what human consciousness actually is. It is like a thought experiment carried out in clay, the limit case that illuminates the norm.

The absence of intentionality in the Golem is also the kabbalistic answer to the question of whether the Golem has a soul: no, it does not, because the soul is precisely that structure which points towards God, which has purposes, which desires its own perfection. The Golem is a perfectly functioning body without the intentional structure that would make it a subject.

The Golem and artificial intelligence

Eco's most original and most prophetic contribution is the systematic connection he draws between the Golem and artificial intelligence. Eco is among the first Italian intellectuals, and among the few anywhere, to grasp with precision the structure shared by the kabbalistic tradition and the computational dream: both rest on the idea that reality is computable, that there exists a formal level, letters, symbols, bits, to which reality can be reduced, and that whoever masters that formal level can produce behaviour that looks intelligent.

The parallel Eco draws is exact: a computer program does not understand what it does, it executes instructions, produces output, responds to input, exactly as the Golem carries out orders without understand-

ing them. The question of whether a computer program "really thinks" is the same question the medieval rabbis asked about the Golem: does it have a soul? does it have intentionality? or is it only a very sophisticated mechanism simulating understanding?

Eco was writing this in the 1990s, before the explosion of generative artificial intelligence. But the contemporary debate about AI, is it conscious? does it have intentions? can it suffer?, is exactly the debate he anticipated. And his answer, that the Golem has no intentionality, and that this absence is the fundamental difference between the machine and the human being, is still the most precise and the hardest to refute.

The labyrinth and the Golem

There is one last connection worth pointing out: the Golem moves in a space that in Eco's terms we would call a labyrinth, not in the sense of the labyrinth of Crete but in the sense of the rhizomatic network, the space in which every point is connected to every other without there being a centre or a periphery. Meyrink's Prague ghetto is a labyrinth in this sense: it has no hierarchical structure, no point of arrival, no guaranteed way out.

Eco devoted much of his theoretical reflection to labyrinths, as narrative structures, as encyclopaedic metaphors, as models of how knowledge works. The Golem in the labyrinth is the being that moves in a space it cannot comprehend: it follows the instructions, walks the indicated paths, but it does not carry the map of the labyrinth in its mind. It does not know where it is going, it only knows how to proceed. It is the condition of every formal system: it knows how, but it does not know why.

Angelo Maria Ripellino: Prague as Golem

Prague as Golem

The poet and Slavist who turned a city into a living organism and saw in the Golem the symbol of all artistic creation

The Slavist who lost himself in Prague

Angelo Maria Ripellino (1923–1978) is one of those authors you can love deeply and know little about, at least outside Italy, and often inside it too. A Slavist by training, a scholar of Mayakovsky and Chekhov, a translator of Blok and of dozens of Russian and Czech poets, himself a poet in an Italian that could turn baroque or light as the need arose, Ripellino was also, and perhaps above all, the greatest Italian writer of Prague.

He was not from Prague. He was born in Palermo, lived in Rome, taught Slavic studies at the Sapienza for thirty years. But Prague obsessed him all his life, with that intensity only mythic cities inspire in the foreigners who pass through them and can never quite get out again. He returned many times, read everything that had been written about it, interviewed Czech writers, learned the language. And in 1973 he published *Praga magica*, a book that is many things at once: historical essay, literary guide, prose poem, meditation on death and on culture.

Praga magica: the book that cannot be classified

Praga magica has a structure that defies classification. It is not an essay with a central thesis, not a tourist guide, not a literary history. It is closer to an intellectual wandering, a ramble through centuries of Prague history, following the thread of an obsession rather than a rational plan. Ripellino moves from Rudolf II to Kafka, from the alchemists of the sixteenth century to the German writers of the nine-

teenth, from the Jewish ghetto to the Czech avant-gardes of the twentieth, at a pace that resembles a conversation between people who understand each other without needing to explain everything.

The Golem is one of the book's guiding threads, not the only one, not the principal one, but one of the most persistent. Ripellino pursues it through its variants, its sources, its literary reworkings (Meyrink, of course, but also more obscure sources, Yiddish and Czech texts the average reader does not know). He places it in the context of the Prague Jewish community, of its centuries-long history, of its relations with the surrounding Christian power. He uses it as a key to open doors that always lead to new rooms.

Prague as a living creature

Ripellino's central thesis, if you can call a thesis something that is more poetic intuition than rational argument, is that Prague is itself a Golem. A city built by human hands through centuries of work and intention, animated by something not reducible to the sum of its stones, capable of surviving catastrophes that would have destroyed anything less resistant.

The Jewish ghetto was demolished at the end of the nineteenth century, and Ripellino mourns that demolition with the same intensity with which he mourns the victims of the pogroms. The German quarter of Prague disappeared with the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans. The Habsburg empire ended in 1918. The Nazis destroyed the Jewish community. Communism smothered Czech culture for forty years. And yet Prague is still there, with its castle, its Gothic spires, its medieval streets, its air of a city that has seen everything and forgotten nothing. Like the Golem sleeping in the synagogue attic, ready to be woken when it is needed.

Prose as a mirror of its subject

One of the most extraordinary things about *Praga magica* is that Ripellino's prose resembles the subject it describes. It has the same quality as Meyrink's Prague ghetto: undulating, dense, able to pass in a few lines from erudition to pure poetry, from historical analysis to lyrical evocation. There is no critic's distance in this book: there is the total immersion of a man who let the city obsess him until it transformed him.

Ripellino quotes from memory, mixes languages (Italian, Czech, German, Yiddish), moves from a quotation to a personal recollection to a formal analysis without the transition being felt. It is a prose that has absorbed the lesson of the great Viennese feuilletonists, Kraus, Altenberg, Polgar, filtered through the Italian baroque and Slavic musicality. It is, in a way, the perfect language for describing Prague: a language that comes from outside but has learned to dream like the city it describes.

The Golem and artistic creation

The most original reading Ripellino offers of the Golem is the one connecting it to artistic creation. In some memorable pages of *Praga magica*, Ripellino suggests that the Golem is the symbol of every work of art: an artificial being built out of words (or notes, or colours, or stones) according to mysterious rules, which at a certain point begins to live a life of its own, to surprise its own maker, to escape the control of the person who made it.

The poet is Rabbi Loew. The text is the Golem. And as the Golem can turn against its maker, so the work can betray, disappoint, exceed the intentions of the person who wrote it, can become something the author did not want, did not foresee, did not know he was making. This is one of the finest intuitions we have met, and it belongs to Ripellino: the idea that the risk of artistic creation and the risk of making a Golem are structurally identical.

Ripellino died in 1978, at fifty-five, after years of illness. *Praga magica* is his Golem: built with an almost maniacal patience and passion, animated by a force that goes beyond its maker's intentions, surviving the death of the man who made it. It still walks, with that undulating baroque prose, through the streets of a city that never stops dreaming.

Part Six: Cybernetics

Norbert Wiener: the machine as modern counterpart

The machine as modern counterpart

The father of cybernetics and the moment when the myth of the Golem becomes a scientific diagnosis

A mathematician at Cambridge meets the Rabbi of Prague

Norbert Wiener (1894–1964) did not need to go looking for the Golem. He had arrived at it out of necessity, because his own research had led him, step by step, to the point where modern science and the medieval myth looked each other in the eye and recognised one another.

Wiener was one of the most important mathematicians of the twentieth century: a professor at MIT, the founder of cybernetics, author of *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948), the book that laid the theoretical foundations of everything we now call computing, information theory, artificial intelligence. He was not a man of letters, not a philosopher of culture, not a mythographer. He was a scientist.

God & Golem, Inc., published in 1964, a few months before Wiener died, is his intellectual testament. A short, dense book, written with the urgency of a man who knows he has little time and much to say. And in its closing chapter, after working through the philosophical and religious implications of machines that learn and reproduce, Wiener writes the sentence that closes the circle between modern science and medieval myth: "The machine is the modern counterpart of the Golem of the Rabbi of Prague."

The title as a semiotic act

Before the content, the title is already a position. *God & Golem, Inc.* sets the sacred alongside the bureaucratic form of industrial capitalism. God and his Golem, the maker and the creature, have become partners in a limited company. They have pooled their capital (scientific knowledge) and are preparing to collect the dividends (the power that comes from intelligent machines).

Wiener is not indulgent about that partnership. Throughout his career he had denounced the dangers of the link between fundamental science and military interests, had refused research contracts with the Pentagon, had written publicly against the use of automation for warlike ends. The ironic title is also an indictment: the sacred mystery of creation, that gesture by which the Rabbi of Prague animated clay by pronouncing the name of God, has been turned into a commercial product. The Golem has a board of directors.

The word becomes code

Wiener's central analogy between the machine and the Golem is not decorative, it is structural. To grasp its depth you have to start from the concept Wiener had placed at the centre of cybernetics: information.

In Wiener's system, information is not semantic content, it is not what a word "means". It is structure: the form transmitted through a channel, which organises matter and produces behaviour. A machine that

receives instructions and carries them out is a machine that has received information and "embodies" it in physical action. The difference between a heap of gears and a working clock is the information that has given form to their arrangement.

Rabbi Loew's Golem receives life through the *shem*, the written word, the divine name placed on its forehead or under its tongue. Wiener's machine receives life through code, the sequence of instructions that organises its internal states and produces its behaviour. In both cases it is the word, the formal language, the symbolic structure, that makes the passage from inert matter to animated matter.

Kabbalah had grasped this millennia earlier: reality is made of language, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet constitute the world, and whoever masters the right combinations can touch the deep structure of the real. Wiener, the mathematician, was saying the same thing in scientific language: information is the organising principle of matter, and whoever controls the information controls the behaviour of the machine, as the rabbi controlled the Golem by controlling the name.

The maker's game with the creature

The most surprising chapter of *God & Golem, Inc.* is the one on machines that learn, and that beat their own builders. Wiener describes Arthur Samuel's checkers program: a program that is not instructed in how to play well but learns from experience, improving game after game, and in the end surpassing the level of its own author.

For Wiener this is an event of enormous philosophical scope. Not because the machine "thinks" or "wants" — Wiener is rigorous enough not to yield to those anthropomorphisms. But because it introduces into the relation between maker and creature a dynamic the Golem tradition knew very well: the moment when the creature escapes the maker's intentions, when the product surpasses the producer, when the pupil beats the master.

Borges had put the question in poetic form: *"Who will tell us what God felt, looking down at His rabbi in Prague?"* Wiener puts it in scientific form: what does it mean, for the process of creation, that the product can surpass the producer in intelligence? To whom belongs the credit, and the responsibility, for the actions of a machine that has learned to do things its builder cannot do?

The gadget worshippers

There is a chapter of *God & Golem, Inc.* that the later history of artificial intelligence has all but buried, and that is perhaps the most urgent: the one Wiener devotes to "modern sorcery" and to the danger of the *gadget worshippers*, those who give in to the temptation of using machines for ends the machines cannot responsibly pursue.

The figure Wiener uses is Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice: the man who has learned to summon powers he cannot control, who has unleashed forces he cannot stop. And he uses the variant of the English story *The Monkey's Paw* by W. W. Jacobs: the talisman that grants wishes to the letter, not in spirit, not in intention, but in the precise verbal form of the request.

It is the same logic as Rabbi Loew forgetting to remove the shem before the Sabbath: the creature carries out the instructions perfectly. The problem is not the creature, it is the maker who has not foreseen all the consequences, who has been distracted, who has given in to the belief that once the machine is built the work is finished.

Wiener had in mind MIT's military contracts and industrial automation. But his analysis applies with surgical precision to the artificial intelligence systems of our time: optimisation algorithms that reach their formal objectives while producing disastrous side effects, recommendation systems that maximise engagement and generate addiction and polarisation, machines that carry out to the letter what has been asked of them, and have no means of understanding why that thing should not have been asked.

Where Wiener stands in this book

How does Wiener stand in relation to the other voices in this book? He is not a narrator like Borges, not a witness like Wiesel, not a semiologist like Eco, not an evoker like Ripellino. He is something different, and rarer in this book: the turning point.

In 1964, the same year Borges collected his Golem poem in *El otro, el mismo*, Norbert Wiener was writing from Cambridge that the machine was the modern counterpart of the Golem of the Rabbi of Prague. Two authors, in two different cities, looking at the same creature from opposite angles: Borges through letters and poetry, Wiener through mathematics and cybernetics. Both saw the same thing: that the myth of the Golem was not a story about the past, but a question about the present.

Wiener is the moment when the path of this book, from kabbalistic mysticism to literature, from cinema to music, from semiotics to art history, meets science. It is the moment when the tradition stops being an object of study and becomes a live problem, urgent and unresolved. Rabbi Loew shapes the clay of the Vltava on a Friday night; the researchers at MIT program machines that learn from their own mistakes. The structure is the same. The consequences are still unfolding.

Part Seven: Mass Culture

The Golem in pop: Gargoyles, The X-Files, The Simpsons

The Golem in the American living room

There is a precise moment when a legend stops being the property of specialists and becomes common culture: the moment it enters television. For the Golem, that moment arrives in the 1990s and 2000s, when three American series, *Gargoyles*, *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons*, take hold of the legend, treat it with surprising fidelity to the mythological detail, and hand it back to millions of viewers who would never have read Scholem or Meyrink.

This is not vulgarisation. It is transformation: the text changing medium, voice, addressee, and in changing revealing something the earlier versions had not shown.

Gargoyles: "Golem" (1995)

Three years before *The X-Files*, an American cartoon brings the Golem to the screen with a seriousness many auteur films have not allowed themselves. *Gargoyles*, Greg Weisman's animated series, known for a narrative complexity unusual in daytime animation, devotes an entire episode to the Prague legend in the second cycle of its arc.

The episode is set in Prague. The Maharal's Golem still exists, guarded by Max Loew, a young descendant of the Maharal, and by his father, Rabbi Loew. A dying businessman, Halcyon Renard, has it stolen by the criminal Tomas Brod and transfers his own soul into it, using the creature as an instrument of his own power. The Gargoyles have to stop not a monster but a Golem that has lost its original purpose: no longer the protector of the community, but the weapon of whoever has money enough to buy it.

The lesson of the episode follows that of the legend: the Golem is not evil, it is whatever its master makes of it. The danger lies not in the creature but in the hand that writes the command. When the rabbi recovers control and erases the word, the Golem goes quiet again, waiting. Not defeated: suspended.

What distinguishes *Gargoyles* from the other television versions is the absence of irony. The series treats the legend as a true story, not in the supernatural sense but in the mythological one: as a tale containing a truth about power, about responsibility, about the danger of creations that outgrow their creators.

The X-Files: "Kaddish" (1997)

In the fifteenth episode of the fourth season of *The X-Files*, a young man named Isaac Luria is murdered by right-wing extremists inside the Jewish bookshop in Brooklyn where he works. A few days later his killers begin to die one by one, killed by a silent figure that leaves prints of mud on the floor.

The episode is called "Kaddish", the Jewish prayer for the dead, and its mythological architecture is precise: the Golem is summoned by Isaac's fiancée, Ariel, from the body of the dead man, to do what the law has not done. It is a creature of mourning and of vengeance, built by someone who has lost everything and cannot accept that the world goes on turning as though nothing had happened.

What makes "Kaddish" remarkable is not only its fidelity to the legend, the written command, the figure of clay, the ending in which the creature returns to the earth, but its moral context: the Golem here is not an experiment in magic or philosophy. It is an answer to antisemitism. The same answer for which Rabbi Loew's Golem had been made, to protect the community from its attackers, is recreated in a Jewish neighbourhood of New York, four hundred years after Prague.

The Simpsons: "You Gotta Know When to Golem" (2006)

In a segment of *Treehouse of Horror XVII* (Season 18), Bart Simpson finds the Golem of Prague in a pawn shop owned by Krusty the Clown. The Golem, voiced by Richard Lewis, an American comedian known for his Jewish neurosis, works exactly according to the rules of the legend: he is activated when Bart puts a slip of paper with a written order into his mouth. Bart uses him to take revenge on the bullies.

But the best invention of the episode is not the slapstick violence. It is that the Golem, between one order and the next, is deeply unhappy. He complains. He feels used. He would like to be understood. Lisa, taking pity, decides to keep him company, and makes him a female Golem.

The Simpsons' Golem is Jewish in the most precise sense: he carries the weight of the millennium, the memory of every pogrom, the weariness of one who has protected too long without ever being thanked. He is the creature Elie Wiesel had intuited, the Golem as survivor, as witness, turned into a comic sketch. And in turning it, *The Simpsons* do not empty it: they take it in a direction the serious tradition had never dared, that of the Golem who has a right to his own happiness.

The fidelity of pop to the legend

There is something surprising in all three versions: the care with which they treat the original mythology. Neither *Gargoyles* nor *The X-Files* nor *The Simpsons* invent mechanisms; they use the ones the legend provides. The written command, the figure of clay, the relationship

between the Golem and its maker, the ending that marks the return to the earth. Popular culture does not simplify the legend: it brings it to a new audience without betraying it.

This is a culturally significant fact. It means the legend of the Golem has the right narrative structure to survive a change of medium: specific enough to be recognisable, open enough to adapt to any genre, the mythological drama of *Gargoyles*, the paranormal thriller of *The X-Files*, the black comedy of *The Simpsons*.

From esotericism to prime time

When Gershom Scholem published his research on Kabbalah in the 1930s and 1940s, he was saving a heritage in danger of disappearing. When *Gargoyles*, *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons* use that heritage in American prime time, they complete a journey that runs from the esoteric to the popular, from the mystical to the mainstream.

This is not a loss. It is a multiplication. The legend is not used up by being told to millions of people; it replicates, adapts, finds new meanings. The Golem as corrupted power in *Gargoyles*. The Golem as impossible justice in *The X-Files*. The Golem as an individual who wants to be loved in *The Simpsons*. Three irreconcilable versions, all faithful to the original.

Where mass culture stands in this book

Gargoyles, *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons* are not, technically, works of authorship in the sense that Borges or Kiefer or Wiener are. They are products of American mass culture, written by teams, approved by networks, measured in ratings. And yet they belong in this book because they did something none of the earlier voices had done: they brought the legend of the Golem to people who did not know what it was, and gave them a version good enough to make them want to know more.

There is a sense in which this is the hardest task of all: not to analyse the legend, not to enrich it, but to transmit it. The Golem that reaches the child watching cartoons, or the house where someone is watching *The X-Files* late at night, or the laugh of someone who recognises the reference in *The Simpsons*, is still the Golem. The first letter has not been erased. The creature is still walking.

Epilogue: The First Letter Cannot Be Erased

What remains when the reading is over

What they saw, looking at the same Golem

We have crossed centuries and continents, languages and media, traditions and ruptures. We have met a medieval rabbi shaping clay in the night, a Prague banker dreaming the labyrinths of the ghetto, an Argentine poet who saw in a creature of clay the symbol of imperfect creation, a Yiddish writer using a dying language to keep a vanished world alive. We have met a Czech playwright who, out of the same Prague clay, found the word the twentieth century would use for its own fear. We have met expressionist silent cinema and feminist science fiction, grand opera and free jazz, lithographic illustration and the American comic book.

All of them were looking at the same Golem. And all of them saw something different.

Scholem saw a mystical experience that had turned into a legend. Meyrink saw the collective soul of a city. Leivick saw a creature yearning for a redemption it could not obtain. Singer saw the voice of an oral tradition in danger of disappearing. Borges saw the symbol of imperfect creation and of the unbridgeable distance between the maker and his work. Wiesel saw the protector who did not come in time.

Čapek saw the Golem industrialised, the same story multiplied by the productive power of modernity, with a new word on its forehead: robot. Piercy saw the question of the ethics of creating sentient beings. Ozick saw the structural impossibility of utopia. Chabon saw cultural resistance as a form of protection. Chiang saw the kabbalistic dream carried to its logical conclusion. Wegener saw a visual icon for the European collective unconscious. Duvivier saw an urgent political allegory. Barta saw matter itself coming alive frame by frame. Steiner-Prag saw the streets of a dream that does not end. Bretan, Jacobi, Ellstein, Ovadia, Sitsky, Zorn, Black Francis and Gazpacho heard the music that animates matter. Eco saw the precursor of every thinking machine. Ripellino saw Prague itself as a creature of clay animated by centuries of history. And *Gargoyles*, *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons* carried the legend into the living rooms of millions of people who did not know what a Golem was, and carried it whole.

Why the Golem does not die

The most interesting question is not what each of them saw, but why they all kept looking. Why does this legend, born in a persecuted community in sixteenth-century Prague, handed down orally for generations, turned into literature in the twentieth, keep generating work in periods so different and contexts so distant?

There is no single answer, but there is a structure. The Golem survives because it touches something fundamental in human experience, something that does not change with the ages even though the form in which it appears does. It touches the desire to create life, which is the deepest and most dangerous desire human beings can hold. It touches the question of where the instrument ends and the subject begins. It touches the problem of the maker's responsibility towards his own creation. And it touches, perhaps more than anything, the question of language: whether words are description or creation, whether reality is made of matter or of signs, whether whoever controls language controls the world.

The Golem and us

Before we reach artificial intelligence, the chain passes through two stations that cannot be skipped. The first is Karel Čapek, who in 1921 brought to the stage in Prague, the same Prague as the Maharal's, a play in which biological artificial beings rebel against their makers. The word coined for them, robot, has entered every language in the world, carrying with it, invisible but structurally present, the shadow of Prague clay. Čapek is the Golem industrialised: the same story, the same city, the same question about the creature's soul, but multiplied by the productive power of the twentieth century and translated into the language of class struggle.

The second station is Philip K. Dick (1928–1982), whose novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), made famous by the film adaptation *Blade Runner*, shifts the question decisively. No longer: can the creature rebel? But: how do you tell the creature from the human? Dick's androids are perfect copies of human beings, distinguishable only through the Voigt-Kampff test, which measures empathic reactions to scenes of animal suffering. Whoever answers with indifference is an android. Dick's choice is philosophically precise: empathy, the capacity to feel another's pain as one's own, is the dividing line between the subject and the mechanism. It is the same question the medieval rabbis asked about the Golem (does it have a soul? does it suffer?), the same one Eco reformulated in terms of intentionality. But Dick takes it a step further: what if we could no longer answer?

Artificial intelligence, the large language models, the generative systems, the machines that produce texts and images and music and medical diagnoses, is the Golem of our time. This is not a metaphor: it is the deep structure. We have returned to the *Sefer Yetzirah*: reality is language, the letters (or the tokens, or the neural weights) constitute the world, and whoever masters the right combinations can create something that speaks, reasons, answers, surprises.

The contemporary debate about artificial intelligence, is it conscious? does it have intentions? can it suffer? does it deserve rights?, is the same debate the medieval rabbis had about the Golem. The questions are identical. And the answers are just as difficult, just as uncertain, just as heavy with consequence. Eco was right: the Golem is the imaginary ancestor of every thinking machine. And those who make those machines, the programmers of Mountain View and Seattle, the engineers of Beijing and London, are the Rabbi Loew of our time: sages who have discovered the right combinations of letters and who now ask themselves, with the same unease as the rabbi of Prague, what they have done.

The lesson of the shem

The legend says that Rabbi Loew forgot to remove the shem from the Golem's mouth before the Sabbath. The Golem, deprived of its maker's control, began to destroy. Only the rabbi managed to stop it, tearing the shem from its mouth. The Golem dissolved into dust.

This is the scene that returns, in different forms, in almost every text we have met. It is not a scene of catastrophe: it is a scene of instruction. The lesson is not that making the Golem is wrong. The lesson is that making the Golem requires continuous vigilance, a responsibility that cannot be delegated and cannot be forgotten. Creation does not end with the creative act: it continues every day, every hour, every Sabbath. The shem has to be removed and replaced, removed and replaced, because the creature does not govern itself, and the maker cannot afford to be distracted.

That lesson, so old, so simple, so hard to apply, is perhaps the most valuable contribution of the whole Golem tradition to our present. Not the answer to the question of whether artificial intelligence is conscious. Not the solution to the problem of technological responsibility. Only this: creation never ends. The maker cannot stop being responsible. And forgetting to remove the shem before the Sabbath has consequences.

Emet

The word is still there, on the creature's forehead. Aleph, mem, tav. Truth.

To erase the first letter, to turn emet into met, truth into death, is the act by which Rabbi Loew shuts the Golem down. It is an act of renunciation, of recognition of one's own limits, of humility before the complexity of what one has made. Not every creation has to live for ever. Not every Golem has to walk eternally. Sometimes the deepest gesture of responsibility is not to animate, but to let something return to dust.

But as long as the Golem walks, as long as the creature is alive, as long as the machine works, as long as the text is read, the maker's responsibility does not end. And the question Rabbi Loew asked himself, looking at his creature of clay, never sets: what have I done? what have I set in motion? and what will happen when I am no longer here to remove the shem?

There is no definitive answer. There is only the question, which each generation inherits from the one before and passes on to the one after, a little more urgent every time.

אמת

Truth. The beginning. Always.

Further Reading

The kabbalistic tradition and the myth

Hebrew Bible: Psalm 139 (foundational text: the only occurrence of the term *golem* in the canonical Bible)
Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin, 65b (5th c.): the earliest mentions of artificial creation in rabbinic discourse
Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Formation), 3rd–6th c.: the fundamental text of kabbalistic cosmology: reality as language, the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet as the structure of the world
Aryeh Kaplan (trans. and commentary), *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation in Theory and Practice*, 1997
Eleazar of Worms, writings of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (German Pietists), 13th c.: the systematisation of the Golem ritual
Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 1941
Gershom Scholem, "The Idea of the Golem", in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik), 1960
Isaac Luria, the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* and *Shevirat HaKelim* (16th c.): divine contraction and the breaking of the vessels: concepts central to Anselm Kiefer

Literature

Jorge Luis Borges, "El Golem" (poem), in *El otro, el mismo* (The Self and the Other), 1964
H. Leivick, *Der Golem* (dramatic poem in eight scenes, in Yiddish), 1921: first major staging: Habima, Moscow, 1925, in Hebrew
Elie Wiesel, *The Golem*, 1983: with drawings by Mark Podwal
Karel Čapek, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, 1921: the text that introduced the word "robot" into the languages of the world
Marge Piercy, *He, She and It* (British edition: *Body of Glass*), 1991
Cynthia Ozick, *The Puttermesser Papers*, 1997
Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, 2000
Ted Chiang, "Seventy-Two Letters", in *Stories of Your Life and Others*, 2002
Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 1968

The masters: storytellers and essayists

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Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Golem*, 1982
Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Nobel Lecture*, 1978
Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea), 1993
Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus* (Kant e l'ornitorinco), 1997
Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Magic Prague* (Praga magica), 1973

Cinema

Paul Wegener and Carl Boese (dir.), *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (The Golem: How He Came into the World), silent film, 1920
Julien Duvivier (dir.), *Le Golem* (The Golem), film, 1936: with Harry Baur as Rudolf II
Stanley Kubrick (dir.), *2001: A Space Odyssey*, film, 1968
Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, novel, 1968
Arthur C. Clarke, "The Sentinel", short story, 1951: the seed of *2001*

Jiří Barta (dir.), *Krysař* (The Pied Piper), animated short, 1985
Jiří Barta (dir.), *Golem*, animated short, pilot 1996 (project begun in the late 1980s)

Visual art

Hugo Steiner-Prag, twenty-five lithographs for Gustav Meyrink, *Der Golem* (portfolio *Der Golem. Prager Phantasien*), 1916
Paul Celan, *Todesfuge* (Death Fugue), 1948
Anselm Kiefer, *Breaking of the Vessels*, installation, Jewish Museum, New York, 1990
Anselm Kiefer, *Bleibücher* (lead books), 1983–
Anselm Kiefer, cycle devoted to Paul Celan, 1980–
Niki de Saint Phalle, *Golem* (sculpture), Kikar HaGolem, Jerusalem, 1972
Niki de Saint Phalle, *The Tarot Garden*, Garavicchio, Tuscany, 1978–1998

Music

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Hartmut Gagelmann, *Nicolae Bretan, His Life, His Music*, trans. Beaumont Glass, Pendragon Press, 2001
Frederick Jacobi, *The Golem* (orchestral rhapsody), 1932
Abraham Ellstein, *The Golem* (opera, English libretto by Sylvia Regan), 1962
Moni Ovadia, *Oylem Goylem* (theatre and music performance), 1992
Larry Sitsky, *The Golem* (opera), 1993
John Zorn, *Masada* series (compositions on the Jewish musical tradition), 1993–
Black Francis, live score for Paul Wegener's *Der Golem* (1920)
Gazpacho, *Golem* (track, northern European progressive rock)

Cybernetics and artificial intelligence

Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, MIT Press, 1948
Norbert Wiener, *God & Golem, Inc.*, MIT Press, 1964

American mass culture

Gargoyles, season 2, ep. 40, "Golem", series created by Greg Weisman, 1995
The X-Files, season 4, ep. 16, "Kaddish", 1997
The Simpsons, "Treehouse of Horror XVII", "You Gotta Know When to Golem", season 18, 2006

About the Author

Giovanni Martini is a sociologist living in Trentino, on the Pine' plateau in northern Italy. An omnivorous reader with a preference for speculative fiction, philosophy and science, he has always looked for connections between distant disciplines: physics and consciousness, East and West, myth and technology. He prefers unresolved tensions to easy syntheses. *Errancies* is the English counterpart of his Italian series *Collana Erranze*, and the place where he collects these border crossings.